

Teen And Up Audiences

Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Wild Kratts

Chris Kratt

Martin Kratt

Aviva Corcovado

Koki (Wild Kratts)

Jimmy Z (Wild Kratts)

Diego (Original Character)

Original Kratt Character(s) (Wild Kratts)

Zach Varmitech

Angst

Hurt/Comfort

Mind Control

Torture

Aftermath of Torture

Chris Kratt has PTSD

Amnesia

Team Tortuga as Family

Panic Attacks

Mystery

Protective Martin Kratt

Martin Kratt is trying his best

Chris Kratt is making it really difficult

Kidnapping

Body Horror

Other Additional Tags to Be Added

Implied/Referenced Self-Harm

Alcohol

Blood and Violence

Hallucinations

Paranoia

Drowning

Non-Consensual Drug Use

Zach Varmitech finally gets a tag because he's in more than one chapter

welcome to the party Zach Varmitech

Protective Chris Kratt

Martin Whump in this one fellas

well everyone's kinda got some whump but Martin's going through it

English ← Previous Work Part 2 of REPROGRAMMED AU

DECODED

AnonymousCriticter

Summary:

Martin was the self-sacrificial type. He was the one who woke up every night just to pull Chris out of a nightmare. He was the one who tested the more questionable technology Aviva whipped up. He was the one who took on extra tasks when someone wasn't feeling well. He was the one who would take the blame when the brothers landed themselves in trouble. He was the one who would carry the burdens of everyone else around him, while locking his own away in a dark corner, and never once complain.

And Chris knew for a fact, the only reason Martin didn't trade places with him when Diego dragged him away and locked him within his own mind was because his brother couldn't work miracles.

But Chris didn't think he could share this burden with Martin.

He decided he wouldn't even give him the choice.

Notes:

Hello! I've returned once more to happily present the sequel of Reprogrammed! If you're a new reader, I highly suggest reading the previous work or I'm afraid this one will be very confusing!

New Chapters posted on Saturdays <3

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/145412074>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_1_endnotes\)](#).)

Chris was honestly surprised at how calm he managed to stay through the rest of the socialization and the long walk back to the Tortuga. The golden shard weighed heavily in his pocket, and he managed to not look absolutely deranged as he scanned the faces of the few people they encountered in the nearly empty streets of Venice.

And he didn't cause a scene when the group arrived back to their giant turtle research vessel, nor when everyone was too exhausted to say proper goodnights, but rather waved as they each shut themselves in their rooms.

He didn't even make a sound as Martin fell into his sheets of their shared room, snoring before Chris shut the door. Unable to do much besides stand at the entrance, Chris dared to reach into his pocket once more.

He wasn't entirely sure why he didn't just tell the others. That would be the logical and beneficial thing to do. After all, he wasn't the only one in danger anymore. This revelation would heavily impact the rest of the team. But something inside of him held him back. Whether it was fear, vendetta, or just plain stupidity, Chris couldn't tell.

His fingers massaged the smooth gold but he didn't pull it out into the open. And in the cool dim lights of the *Tortuga's* nocturnal cycle, it was like a gunshot had gone off in his head, signaling the start of a race of spiraling thoughts.

An itch had overcome his entire body, an overwhelming feeling that there were eyes on him, watching him from the corners, but no matter how fast he turned he could never catch the source.

How long had Diego been following them?

Was it really Diego that he ran into?

How did he find them?

And that was the question, wasn't it? How.

Never mind the fact that supposedly Diego had been shoved out of an aircraft, miles in the air; the man, despite being human, had immortal hellspawn energy that could only be a cause of his sheer cruelty. He was like a cockroach.

No, the fact Diego was alive wasn't what alarmed Chris. It was the clear promise of finishing what he started. Their business before had been merely circumstantial. Chris was in possession of technology that Diego had a use for, despite how it felt, it was never personal.

Diego was cruel in his methods, but he was damn efficient. He didn't target people unless there was something to *gain*. Money, territory, clients, and product... those were the things that motivated him. He didn't send warnings. He didn't leave personalized gift boxes with pretty calligraphy tags. He didn't give his victims time to know he was coming.

This... This was different. This was *revenge*. And this time, it was personal.

And once Chris had thoroughly terrified himself with that epiphany, he found himself asking the question again.

How?

It wasn't like Diego still had access to Zach's technology, and Aviva had been extremely thorough in her update to both the Tortuga and the suits. If there had been any way to track them previously it was certainly gone now. One of the first things she installed after his return was a way to mask the energy source trail that Diego had been using previously.

Chris only briefly degraded himself for being the one to set it up in the first place.

The thought had never previously crossed Chris's mind, but with only a moment of pondering, he realized just how little time he had *actually* spent with Diego in a conscious state of mind. And while some of his memories were returning, it was like trying to fit together a puzzle with too many missing pieces. Large holes and isolated pieces that he didn't know where to put. He couldn't construct a complete and accurate timeline even if he tried.

It wouldn't be completely absurd to assume that during one of these gaps, some sort of tracker was planted on *him*.

Nausea at even the idea crawled up Chris' throat and immediately he was in the bathroom, wrestling off his shirt, twisting in the mirror, frantically scanning over his skin.

And the spontaneous fear calmed as he patted along his back. If there was anything attached to him, it would've been found either by himself or the hospital staff when he was first admitted.

And then a new fear, sharper than the last, had him freezing where he stood, and meeting his reflection's eyes.

Unless... it was inside of him.

Like a microchip one would plant in their house cat to keep them from roaming too far, was his first disgusted thought. The next was more frantic and violent and contained the impulse to tear all his skin off until he found it.

Chris' muscles tensed and he brought his fist to his mouth, biting down on it until he tasted blood to physically restrain himself against clawing at every inch of his torso.

Letting out a whimper, he felt the wall behind his back which supported his slow descent to the floor as his knees gave out, muscles tensing and untensing with an intense feeling of wrongness.

It was just another sick reminder of how his body no longer belonged to *him*.

He bit down further on his hand, instinctively muffling his cries, as he could still hear the soft snoring of his older brother in the connected room.

Guilt flushed through his nervous system, overcoming the panic for just a moment that he needed a reminder he wasn't the only one in danger now.

Every second he wasted on this floor was another second Diego could use to kill everyone Chris held dear.

Back when Chris had been wearing the suit, his pitiful attempt at stopping Diego had failed miserably, and in the process almost got his entire team killed along with him. At the end of it all, Martin had been the one to take that final step, to do what Chris had been unable to. The reminder of that failure had been weighing heavily on the younger Kratt for months.

Martin was the self-sacrificial type. He was the one who woke up every night just to pull Chris out of a nightmare. He was the one who tested the more questionable technology Aviva whipped up. He was the one who took on extra tasks when someone wasn't feeling well. He was the one who would take the blame when the brothers landed themselves in trouble. He was the one who would carry the burdens of everyone else around him while locking his own away in a dark corner, and never once complain.

And Chris knew for a *fact*, the only reason Martin didn't trade places with him when Diego dragged him away and locked him within his own mind was because his brother couldn't work miracles.

But Chris didn't think he could share this burden with Martin.

He decided he wouldn't even give him the choice.

So, like a practiced sport, Chris shoved everything else down and used the counter to crawl off the floor for the second time that night. He met his reflection's hardened gaze, his chest, bare and sweaty, shoulders trembling, and breaths coming in labored draws.

The confidence of his earlier resolve returned, and he straightened his shoulders to look as brave as he dared, despite the storm of fear raging in his gut.

Diego wanted to make this personal? Fine. It was personal.

Chris hastily exited the bathroom as quietly as he could and marched to his shared closet, throwing on a new pair of pants and his usual sweatshirt. He then pulled down his backpack and began haphazardly emptying it of its contents on the floor. He was quick to sort through essentials and repack them along with a few pairs of socks, not even checking to see if they matched. He snatched the gear he kept so organized around his room, throwing it into the bag in a manner that would have pulled a scoff and judgemental look had he witnessed Martin doing the same thing. But he ignored the small part of him that pleaded to dump out the bag and repack it in a more accessible and organized fashion.

The belongings in his nightstand rattled louder than intended when he threw open the drawer, Chris flinched at the noise but didn't halt his search until his hands encompassed a leather notebook. He flipped through the pages rapidly until

coming across the one he was looking for, tearing it out unceremoniously before shoving it in his pocket. He hated separating pages from his research, but his instincts to pack light overcame his documentation pet peeves.

He didn't stop to think about his impulsive actions until he was standing at the door, backpack slung over one shoulder, and looking back at his brother who hadn't stirred through the whole ordeal.

Martin was going to kill him for this...

A part of Chris wished he had been a little louder, and that Martin had interrupted him mid-frenzy, and talked him out of doing something really stupid. The more hardened and fearful part knew this was the best way to keep him safe. To keep them all safe.

He was a target, that was a guarantee. But they didn't *have* to be.

His hand unconsciously began scratching at his collarbone, in a feeble attempt to locate the tracker he theorized was hidden.

Besides, Chris recalled that Martin had been the one to first make the argument, "Better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission," one day when they had traveled a little too far away from their family's campground as kids to go investigate the frogs they had heard all night.

Chris forced himself to look away as he quietly shut the door behind him. He would work things out with his team, just as soon as he could ensure they wouldn't get killed just for being around him.

His next stop was at the Tortuga's main computer. Koki had set up an entire algorithm to track Diego's financial trail, but as expected it had gone completely cold since their last encounter. *On the account of him being dead and all...*

As if the situation didn't feel real enough already, Chris let out a shaky breath when he spotted the singular point of data on one of the many bank accounts they had theorized to belong to Diego in some sense.

It was a withdrawal. Not a large sum, in fact, it barely touched the massive assets that the police were still investigating the origins of. But it was still a data point. A trail to follow.

Diego wasn't stupid. He hadn't touched his electronic fortune in almost 6 months. This was practically an open invitation.

Come find me, Chris could practically hear him purring.

So, Chris pulled at that string and tracked down the exact ATM the cash was pulled from less than 24 hours prior.

"Canada, how classy," Chris wiped the evidence of his findings from the computer before checking the Tortuga's current flight trajectory.

Whether it was actually Diego that Chris had bumped into in Venice or not remained a mystery. Despite replaying the moment in his head, trying to remember it to the best of his abilities, despite the similar hair and build, he never did catch a glimpse of the man's face. And as he concluded through his panic later in the bathroom, it was a coincidence fueled by paranoia. It was highly probable Diego had paid someone off to leave that box for him, rather than come all the way to Venice and do it himself, just to not even make an appearance. Either way, if Diego had made it back to North America after their last encounter in Africa, it was confirmed he at least regained some method of transportation.

That also meant he had access to funds that they couldn't trace. Which only made the purposeful digital footprint in Canada stand out more.

The Tortuga's autopilot travel was cruising a lot slower than Jimmy would normally pilot, but luckily it was already traveling in the general direction of North America. Which would at least save Chris some time as he pondered over which vehicle he could borrow without sentencing himself to a death wish via Aviva.

Before making his way to the garage, his eyes fell upon the glass case that stored his new creature power suit. Previous instincts born from years of creature adventuring screamed at him to never leave without it. And while he trusted Aviva, he wasn't sure if he was willing to test out just how foolproof the new anti-mind control firewall was.

He would be left vulnerable, but Chris couldn't help the paranoia of willingly bringing the suit anywhere near Diego. He wouldn't play into his hands like that.

Fearful of anything that could possibly lead back to the very people he was trying to protect, Chris also slid the creaturepod from his pocket and placed it on the center console, with it a hastily-made note addressed to his friends. After all they'd been through for him, he felt the least he owed was an explanation.

His footsteps echoed over the mechanical staircase that led to the belly of the ship where all the extra gear and inventions were kept. He managed to remember to slip on an additional jacket before putting on one of the insect-inspired helmets.

The Insecto-Copter wouldn't do much to protect him from the elements and was mostly beneficial for short-range travel, but its compact design would allow him to travel faster and more discreetly. He arranged his backpack onto the front of his chest, which thankfully also provided more insulation, and strapped the flying pack to his back, securing it around his torso.

And before the thoughts of how scared Martin would be could make him change his mind, Chris opened the garage door momentarily, diving into the void of the night sky.

Notes:

I have a tumblr where I share art and extra discussions about the AU, which you can find right here:
<https://www.tumblr.com/littlecittereli>

I also have a fun playlist for this series, of which you can find right here:
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2Tq7bmpDv4CcSqYZW7VOHv?si=5fea14ddcd254d41>

Thank you so much for reading, I can't wait to hear your thoughts <3

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/145897447>)

Notes:

I know it's starting off at a bit of a slow pace but things are gonna pick up soon I promise!

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_2_endnotes\)](#).)

Anxious thoughts repeated in Chris' head as he trekked through a sidewalk barely cleared of the piles of snow around it. He could feel the salt that was regularly applied to melt the ice crunch under his boots.

After cruising for several hours, Chris arrived at a fairly small and secluded town, surrounded by a snowy mountain range. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, he packed up the Insecto-Copter and managed to shove it into his backpack. The sun had just barely started to show itself, as such the streets were eerily quiet. Not that Chris minded, he was making great time and expected to reach the ATM before having to encounter a single citizen.

The Tortuga, probably still in a timezone a few hours late, wouldn't see the sun for a little longer. Of which, Chris was extremely grateful for... Assuming they hadn't noticed his absence yet, his thoughts kept drifting to his team's wellbeing.

Hoping they would read the note he left, and actually listen to his demands to not look for him was almost futile. They were very persistent people, who unfortunately could never turn a blind eye to trouble. Just another reason he had painfully departed with his creaturepod.

And each depressive thought of how much unnecessary anxiety and trouble he was putting his friends through was dismissed with the mental reminder that he was basically a walking beacon being tracked by an undead maniac that isn't above murder or torture.

A small voice almost tried to reason that he was only *theoretically* being tracked, but the possibility was enough to hold Chris' resolve steady. He wouldn't *theoretically* put his friends in danger either.

He had already done enough of that.

No, he would never be safe, not while Diego is still walking free.

Pulling the hood of his bright green jacket further down his face to try and insulate his head further, and regretting not grabbing a hat, Chris spotted the ATM on the street corner just ahead.

He couldn't help the sudden rush of adrenaline as he jogged towards it, feeling a little silly at how he almost expected Diego to be waiting right here.

He stopped in front of the machine, catching his breath as the warmth from his mouth visualized as puffs of smoke in the freezing air. His eyes scanned around the machine and the general area, not entirely sure of what he was looking for.

The sound of rubber tires against the grainy salt of the road had Chris nearly jumping out of his skin, but as he whipped around, the average-looking car patiently drove right past him. It was nothing more than the first sign of the town around him awaking.

And suddenly Chris felt really, *really* dumb.

What had he been expecting? A welcome parade with a giant lion balloon that says "Hey, come turn me in to the police!" with Diego's home address written on the side?

In his frenzy to simply get away from the Tortuga, he had tunnel vision on the ATM location with not even a spare thought of what to do once he actually got there.

Chris let out a frustrated sigh as he turned back towards the machine. The withdrawal... It was a clue. Something that would go completely unnoticed unless purposely sought out. Diego had been baiting Chris to come out here.

But why? Diego had already delivered his threat... and theoretically had the means to track Chris down whenever he wanted. And yet, instead of breaking into the Tortuga in their sleep, he had left little breadcrumbs to lure them away.

But then this couldn't be the final destination. If Diego really wanted to be followed, surely he wouldn't plot for their encounter to be on a random street corner in a mundane town with plenty of witnesses.

There was another breadcrumb, he just had to find it.

A brief thought cautioned Chris against it, and a temptation to go find the nearest payphone and ask for a pickup filled him. This could all be in his head... just a series of coincidences that amount to nothing. A terrifying thought filled him for a moment, that his hallucinations and paranoia had manifested this entire ghost chase, and he was just having a mental breakdown of sorts. His therapist had warned him of reality distortion.

But again the hair on the back of his neck stood up in alarm and he felt the wrongness of something crawling under his skin somewhere he couldn't reach.

Maybe he was going crazy, but if there was even a chance that Diego was still out there... he had to know for sure.

With a more determined step, he walked fully up to the ATM. The suburban atmosphere around him felt nostalgic. He had grown up in a largely populated town, and after years of traveling and studying wildlife, the domestic city noises always made him feel like he was visiting home. Taking in his surroundings as the sun began to warm the air and more people found their way onto the sidewalks, Chris began to read some of the storefront signs around him.

Animal Skins and Ammunition...

This was a hunting town. Which didn't surprise Chris, given the secluded location and healthy ecosystems surrounding it.

Diego was a poacher for Christ's sake. What could Diego gain by coming here?

The mundane-looking people of this town were certainly not in the price range of any sort of business Diego could offer... So what other reason would Diego even know of its existence?

Looking towards the tall and intimidating evergreen trees he could see beyond the small cityscape, Chris' gaze hardened.

Product.

When Martin first drifted awake, he didn't even notice the absence of his alarm going off. Instead, he rolled over, stretching his arms upwards as the rest of his brain sluggishly turned on. And when he peaked his eyes open to glance at the ceiling, the morning light from the window to his left had already bathed the room in a pale light.

For a moment he was almost confused to see that morning had already come, so used to waking up at least once throughout the night to either coax his brother out of a nightmare or check to make sure he was actually sleeping.

A small smile crept on Martin's face and he relaxed into his pillow for a moment. He knew taking a night out would be good for all of them. He felt a little accomplished for once; like he had finally done something that made an impact on his brother's wellbeing. It was hard to take a step back at first, letting Chris set the pace and asking for help when he needed it. His therapist was making amazing progress, and Martin was extremely grateful, but at the same time a little envious of her involvement.

Maybe it was just a protective instinct. The fear of having his brother so far away, not knowing if he was dead or alive for so long seemed to permanently linger in his actions nowadays. Maybe it was his deep-seated need to be viewed as reliable and useful to those around him and be trusted to handle all their problems.

Jeez, maybe he needed a therapist.

His momentary inner celebration at the lack of nightmares came to a halt when Martin finally shifted to a sitting position and glanced over to Chris' side of the room. He was met with an empty bed.

Which is when Martin finally noticed the alarm had never gone off. Chris always was an early riser, but the lack of alarm being set was an indicator that he had never gone to bed in the first place.

Martin let out a disappointed sigh, running his hands through his matted hair, before dragging himself to his feet. His joy at the assumed milestone had dissipated entirely and as he threw on a fresh pair of clothes he prepared himself to go find wherever Chris had scurried off to.

It wasn't an unfamiliar routine. Chris still struggled with his insomnia and would walk the halls of the Tortuga like a ghost when he couldn't sleep. Sometimes when Martin woke up to check on him, he would drag Chris back to bed. Sometimes Chris would find his way back on his own. Other times Martin would go on a scavenger hunt in the morning to find where he lost track of time in a task.

He decided to make a stop in the kitchen first, figuring he could at least temp Chris to step away from whatever he was doing with the promise of breakfast.

Jimmy and Aviva were both already occupying the space. The redhead was humming a small tune while pawing at some scrambled eggs with a spatula. His chipper mood suggested he had probably been awake for a little while, probably keeping an eye on the Tortuga's flight pattern. Their resident inventor was a little more dead to the world, cradling a mug of coffee to her chest and barely nodding at Martin's appearance.

Martin couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him as Aviva struggled out a 'thanks' when Jimmy set a plate in front of her.

"Hungry?" Jimmy offered, tilting his head towards the pan full of scrambled eggs.

Martin nodded as he found himself in front of their electric kettle, switching it on and preparing two mugs. One with two scoops of hot chocolate mix, and the other with a lemon and ginger tea bag. "I'm gonna go find Chris if you want to make him a plate too."

The pilot hummed in acknowledgment. 'Finding Chris' was pretty much code for 'He didn't sleep so it might be an off-day.'

On his way to the garage, Chris' favorite location for mindless tasks and cleaning, Martin passed Koki as she was making her way to the main hub with a cheerful greeting and a reminder to join them in the kitchen at some point.

After an unsuccessful search in the garage, and their numerous supply closets, Martin hesitantly made his way back to the kitchen, wanting to check if Chris had joined the others already before searching the sunroof.

Martin immediately knew something was wrong when three pairs of alarmed eyes met his upon his entry. Jimmy and Aviva, who was much more awake, crowded around Koki who held a small sheet of paper and a green creaturepod.

koki exchanged the letter with a sympathetic frown, "I found it on the main console."

*Hey guys,
Sorry about this: Diego's alive. I think.
I'm going to take care of it though, alone.
(As in: don't get involved, thanks)
So just sit tight and stay out of trouble, okay?
I'll be back soon, promise.*

The note was undoubtedly written by Chris. It was apologetic, but also firm in a witty and annoying way. *And so excruciatingly vague.*

Martin felt like the air had been punched out of his lungs. Before he could address the waiting stares of his friends, he turned and sprinted back to his room.

He threw the door open in disbelief, praying that his brother had suddenly gained an appreciation of cruel pranks. The empty bed staring back at him felt mocking.

Martin's eyes swept around the room, noticing the messiness wasn't just contained to his side. One of their biggest points of contingency was their different standards of cleanliness, especially in their living quarters. Chris demanded spotless floors and tidy desks.

So to see the small amount of clutter on Chris' side, and the way his drawers were all partially open with clothing haphazardly spilling out, brought Martin to the reality of it all.

Things were supposed to be getting better. Chris was supposed to be getting better. Diego was dead. He had to be. Martin should know considering he was the one who was at fault. Even if it was difficult to come to terms with the fact someone's life was in his hands, he never regretted it for a second. Thinking it over in the solitude of his own mind, Martin reasoned he would do it again without hesitation. But he never actually thought he would get that opportunity.

Before his breath could pick up further, Martin's eyes carefully raked over Chris' side of the room, catching on a small handheld notebook, sitting halfway in the drawer of his nightstand.

His brow furrowed with despair as he read the cover, "Diego's debts." However, as he began to flip through the pages, he realized it was the least concerning thing about the book.

Martin had struggled intensely in the past months to respect his brother's privacy. He only knew the facts from the police report and the hospital diagnoses. He also picked up a few details after being present during so many nightmares, and Chris would sometimes voluntarily mention a few of the thoughts he had been struggling with.

But *this* was Chris' completely unfiltered account of memories.

Martin brought a hand to his mouth as if it could contain the oxygen that refused to enter his lungs. One page detailing the end of someone's life while the next painted a scene of torture. Page after page, Martin couldn't bring himself to stop until about halfway through, he noticed a small portion had been torn out.

Martin's knees eventually gave out as he stared at the nightmarish book, sitting on the edge of Chris' bed when Aviva finally peeked through the door.

"Martin?" She questioned softly, letting herself in at the lack of an immediate response.

"He's gone," Martin confirmed, though it was unnecessary.

"We know." Aviva carefully sat beside him. "We checked the security footage, he left only an hour after Jimmy set up the autopilot."

"Which means he..."

"Could be anywhere. Yeah..." Aviva finished. "He left his creature power suit." After a few moments of Martin remaining uncharacteristically silent and still, she asked, "Do you think Diego's really... not dead?"

For a minute, Aviva didn't think he would answer but finally, Martin broke the silence, gently closing the book. "I've seen him have nightmares. He wakes up, not knowing where he is or who I am, but he still lets me help him." He carefully stands back up, Aviva watching him with a calculated gaze. "I think for him to run off like this without saying anything, something would've really had to convince him."

The engineer frowned slightly at the avoidance of his answer but accepted it nonetheless. Worry had been stirring in her gut since Koki came into the kitchen with a heartbroken expression. She also felt a twinge of anger at whatever managed to spook Chris so badly. She wished that she hadn't been so blind to it; that she had noticed if he was acting strange. Maybe if she had, Chris would've confided in her.

They used to be so close. The last 6 months had been strange and difficult for them all, but Aviva noticed Chris' distance more than anyone. At first, she had been consumed by guilt, partaking in the avoidance herself. It was her own lack of insight that had allowed the entire situation to unfold in the first place. Zach may have reprogrammed the suit, but she couldn't help but feel her hand in the scheme as well; unwilling or not. Even after Chris had expressed his view on the situation to her, and affirmed her innocence, that distance remained.

She missed her best friend. The one that would help her so eagerly with all of her projects, and challenge her scientific views with his complete trust in mother nature. She realized now that they never really got him back. A part of Chris was still trapped in this cycle, always looking over his shoulder. "So, what now?"

Martin let out a long breath, offering a hand to help Aviva back to her feet. "We find Chris so I can guilt trip him about how he single-handedly manages to raise my blood pressure." Martin gave her a small smile, attempting to display confidence and control over the situation. However, the mix of fear and uncertainty was impossible to miss in his eyes.

"And then we find Diego so I can kick him out of another plane for hurting my brother."

Notes:

Thank you for reading, I'll see you all next week! As always if you have any questions or theories, hit up my inbox on tumblr (@littlecrittereli), I love talking about this fic and will take every excuse I can to do so lol

Thank you so much for all the kudos and comments they really mean a lot to me <3

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/146393569>)

Notes:

Another week another chapter... but really we're just getting started!

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_3_endnotes\)](#).)

This was stupid...

This was really, really stupid.

A mantra of insults repeated in Chris' head as he trudged through the blanket of snow coming up to his knees.

His day had started with so much confidence. When the sun had finally risen, he sought out the nearest diner and struck up a conversation with about every local in the establishment. He was pretty damn proud of how well he played off the "backpacking tourist" eager to learn about the best the local wildlife had to offer.

The friendly waiter and regulars of the cafe were just as eager to tell him all about the surrounding area, from where he was most likely to spot a moose to which trails were littered with cougars and bobcats.

After tipping extra and parting ways feeling like an undercover FBI agent, Chris practically beelined in the direction they had warned him against. Chris had fuzzy memories of a variety of different species Diego had transported, but the number of wildcats always stood out the most. Considering the guy wore a gaudy mask of one 24/7, it wasn't hard to guess Diego's weird obsession with cats.

Chris had roughed it in dozens of different terrains, enough to be fully confident in his ability to navigate the frigid mountain range. But after nearly a full day of hiking without a single recognizable landmark, doubt began to creep into his determination. He had hoped that maybe as he got closer he would start to gain some sense of familiarity with the area.

Chris paused, digging the wrinkled pieces of paper from his pocket, and unfolded them. Hastily scribbled illustrations and details of a single-room cabin filled the page. It wasn't one of his clearest memories, but it had been the only other location besides the stolen plane that he could remember Diego having some sort of connection to. A safe house they had visited at some point while Diego was using him like a meat puppet.

At that moment he realized it was a complete assumption that Diego would be hiding somewhere Chris had been before.

He was doing all this under an *assumption*? *God, he was so stupid.*

Diego had connections all across the globe, of course, he would have more than one safehouse. And who's to say the cabin from his memories was even in Canada?

Chris let out a frustrated groan, hearing it echo across the silent forest, reminding him of his isolation.

What was he even planning on doing when he found Diego? Kill him? With what? A compass?

A more realistic thought drifted towards the heavy carving knife in his backpack, but Chris shoved it away, not ready to face that decision just yet.

His actions, fueled by fear and desperation had finally caught up to him as Chris was forced to think about his next steps.

He knew he probably shouldn't be getting his gear in the snow, but he couldn't resist plopping down into the fluffy substance surrounding him, rubbing his hands aggressively down his freezing face.

He was exhausted and cold and had probably just gotten himself lost all on account of a hunch. Spontaneous decisions were supposed to be Martin's forte.

But as he sat, head buried in his hands, Chris couldn't bring himself to regret it. The idea of Diego being able to track him was enough of a reason to put some distance between himself and anyone he cared about.

He sneered at the idea of Diego amusing himself by watching Chris getting utterly lost.

But of course, the tracker was technically just an assumption as well.

Chris realized how insane he would sound if he tried to explain his current predicament to anyone.

Chris kicked the snow in frustration, venting to the empty surroundings. "Oh, what am I doing? You know, just hiking in the middle of nowhere because *maybe* I was here before when I was under mind control, trying to find the person who had me under said mind control, because he *maybe* microchipped me while I was unconscious at some point, and I'm *pretty sure* he wants my family dead for killing him. Also, he's *maybe* not dead!"

Chris was at least feeling less guilty that he didn't tell the rest of his team. They would probably just assume he finally snapped. The worst part was, that Chris wasn't even entirely sure if they'd be wrong.

Considering it would be dark soon, he decided the self-evaluation could wait. He wasn't willing to give up so easily. Something in his gut had pushed him to follow this trail, and if he returned now he wasn't sure if he'd ever truly be able to let it go.

So, he set up camp for the night, huddling under a thermal blanket, close to the fire he built with the firestarter in his backpack.

Fearful of letting his guard down considering who he was out here hunting, Chris couldn't bring himself to even rest his eyes as he watched the flames lick the air. The longer the sun had departed him, the harder it became to ignore the solitude.

And Chris couldn't help but question, was it really bravery that pulled him out into these woods? A need for closure? A heroic attempt to protect his family?

Or was he still just running away?

"Any luck?" Jimmy asked, setting down a steaming mug of coffee on Koki's desk.

“Not yet...” She had the previous night’s security footage up on one window, and the *Tortuga*’s database open on the other. “He did something on the computer before he left, but the camera is too far away to make it out... and I’m not seeing anything different in the system.”

Aviva nodded at the update, sitting alongside Martin at the center console. Martin had been rapidly bouncing his knee, as he stared at the pieces of evidence on the counter. He’s read over the brief note a thousand times, hoping maybe the next time the words would change to include some sort of clue. The leather notebook remained closed; he refused to let anyone open it. Despite only reading through it once, Martin wasn’t sure he could forget it even if he wanted to.

Had Chris been holding back this whole time? Had Martin really been too dense to notice?

He thought about the pages of Chris questioning his worth, about the pages he admitted he felt like a danger to the people around him, about the pages he referred to himself as damaged or tainted.

Martin already knew he was having difficulty overcoming the guilt to a degree, but he inwardly scoffed at the naivety that it was truly improving. Martin noticed how the book’s narrative didn’t shift the blame onto Diego until the more recent pages, but the fact Chris was even taking record at all proved he still felt involved in it.

The room was silent besides the rhythmic anxious tapping of Martin’s foot. After another few minutes of silence and building guilt, Martin blurted out. “He was off yesterday.” gaining the attention of the others he continued, “I knew, and I ignored it.”

“Martin...” Koki started sympathetically before being cut off by another guilty rant.

“I thought maybe it was just the crowd. I asked and he said he was fine, so I dropped it.”

Aviva caught on to Martin’s excuse and tried to reason with him. “See? How were you supposed to know he was lying?”

“Because that’s all he’s done since we got him back,” Martin challenged with a slightly raised tone. His eyes caught on the leather book and he stared as if it had trapped him. “He’s pushed us away, and now he’s got it in his head that it’s *his* responsibility to clean the red from the ledger Diego flooded.”

The rest of the team frowned but didn’t shy away from the anger laced in his voice. They knew that it wasn’t directed towards them.

“It’s happening again...” With a more broken and exhausted tone, Martin buried his head in his hands, “It’s happening all over again and just like last time I stood around like a fucking idiot and let it.”

“It’s not your fault, Martin; it never has been.” Aviva wrapped her arms around his back in an embrace, resting her chin on his broad shoulder. She could feel the deep breaths he was forcing himself to take in order to keep his composure and rubbed her hand in soothing circles. “It’s gonna be alright.”

Jimmy scooted his hoverchair closer as well, resting a supportive hand on Martin’s other shoulder. “If Chris thinks he can get rid of us that easily then maybe he’s not as smart as I thought.”

“We’ve found him before. We can find him again.” Koki piped up as well, placing her hands on his knees. “We’re kinda really good at our job.”

Martin sniffed, and let out a shaky exhale as he stopped hiding in his hands. “Promise if you guys ever try to go on some redemption mission against a corpse you’ll tell me first?”

The trio couldn’t help their smile as they simultaneously agreed with a chorus of, “Promise.”

Clearing his throat, Martin tried to steer their huddle back to its previous purpose, “Are we sure there’s no way we can track the insecto-copter?”

“Already tried,” Aviva scooted back to her laptop to look over the blueprints of the invention that she had been studying almost all day. “There’s not really anything about it that’s accessed remotely. And the battery is pretty standard, nothing that would stand out in a satellite scan.”

“The good news is, it has a limited power source,” Koki added, looking over Aviva’s shoulders. “Meaning he only has about 8 hours of travel before it runs out of juice.”

“Judging by the coordinates of the Tortuga when he jumped ship, and the max speed of the Insecto-copter...” Aviva started muttering to herself as she did the math in her head, before bringing up a map on the large monitor, encircling a portion of it. “That’s the max radius of travel he could’ve taken.”

Jimmy frowned at the size of the circle. It encompassed most of North America and a small portion of Greenland. “That’s a lot of ground to cover...”

“Then let’s narrow it down,” Martin tapped his chin as he stared at the screen. “What direction did he go?”

“Before he went out of range of the outer cameras, he was traveling Northeast,” Koki supplied.

“So unless he changed directions, he would end up somewhere around...” Aviva reconstructed her calculation, drawing a much more condensed circle over northern United States and Southern Canada. “Here.”

They all carefully scanned the new search radius, reading over the long list of towns and counties included.

After another few minutes of thoughtful silence, Martin sighed, spinning the chair he was sitting in. "I don't understand, why would he be looking for Diego *here* ? What's the significance?"

"I got a lot of data on Diego when we were tracking his trades. I could run it through a comparison algorithm and see if we get a hit on any connections to anything in the area?" Koki suggested already typing up the commands. "It may take a while to run but it would be easier than going through all of it manually."

Martin frowned at the prospect of waiting. It had been too long already. His legs were jittery, and he was itching to just go out and *look* .

Sensing his restlessness Aviva suggested. "Why don't you start on that while Martin and I will pay a visit to Diego's previous business partner for information."

It took the older Kratt a moment to realize she had been referring to Varmitech. Despite the special grudge and disgust Martin had towards the inventor for his part in the whole... situation, Zach hadn't crossed his mind in weeks. It was unusual for the villain to remain so well-behaved for such a long period of time.

"I was actually about to ask if we should do like... a wellness check or something," Jimmy offered. "Not a single disturbance in almost half a year. I think that's a record."

Which is how Aviva and Martin ended up at the front gates of a monochromatic mansion, pressing the electronic doorbell for the third time with no answer.

"Maybe he's not home?" Aviva whispered as they waited in silence at the locked gate. A camera above the doorbell facing them directly, blinked motionlessly.

"He could at least send a Zachbot." With an annoyed frown, Martin pressed the button again, holding down on it to draw out the buzzing alarm for several seconds.

Finally, the little speaker rumbled to life with an obnoxious, "Do you people not know how to take social cues?!" Go. Away."

Martin and Aviva shared a look before Martin pressed on the doorbell once more. "We need to talk to you, Zach. Let us in."

"I haven't messed with any stinky animals!" Zach's voice was distorted slightly by the speaker but it sounded like he was trying to yell while also whispering. "Whatever it is, you've got the wrong villain!"

"This isn't about that," Aviva interjected. "It's about Dieg-"

"HUSH SHUSH SHUSH SHUSH-" The speaker rang from the decibel levels as Zach cut her off. Another buzzing sound rang out as the iron gate began to open. When he spoke next it seemed anxious, "Don't say that name. Just- Just come in before somebody sees you."

Aviva shrugged before entering the gate and leading the way through the long sidewalk up to the mansion's front door. The red double doors were taller than they had any right to be and were decorated with the Varmitech logo in the center.

As soon as they approached, a Zachbot swung open the door, escorting the pair through several marble hallways and into an elevator.

As they stood awkwardly with the unconversational bot, Aviva and Martin kept making questionable eye contact as if trying to judge the other's opinion on their current situation.

The elevator opened up into what appeared to be Zach's private office. The walls were almost entirely glass windows, looking out over the property. About twenty feet in front of them was a sleek black desk with a cushioned red chair behind it. The chair was facing the windows, back turned towards the pair.

As they approached Martin noticed the soft classical music playing from a speaker he couldn't see.

"I try to just focus on my company for once and somehow I still get wild rats trying to kick my door in and bother me." Zach mumbled, "Are you incapable of finding a hobby or something?"

"We're not here to visit," Aviva folded her arms, coming to a halt in front of the desk. "And after what you did, you should be lucky we're not here to turn you in."

Zach chuckled, still with his back towards them as if they weren't even worth his time. "You already did that, remember? My legal team has already wiped my record clean. You've got nothing on me, rats."

Martin interjected, already sensing a snarky remark from Aviva that would further derail the conversation, "We need information on Diego."

Zach was quiet for a moment, an unusual feat for the childish billionaire. "I should've never taken that job." His tone was almost... sympathetic.

Zach finally spun his chair around, revealing a heavily bruised face and his arm in a splint. The bruise encompassed his eye, traveling down to his neck, and was shaded with numerous colors. It wasn't a fresh wound by any means.

Aviva was startled enough to look concerned. "...What happened?"

"Someone broke in. Stole some of my shit. Tried to kill me." Zach sneered in annoyance.

While Zach's security system wasn't on par with the Tortuga's it was by no means a joke. No common thief would stand a chance of stealing from Varmitech property.

Martin's brow furrowed. He had been truly hoping it was just some misunderstanding, some fear-mongering trick. He wanted nothing more than to find evidence that Diego was truly gone, and finally be able to give Chris some peace of mind. But considering Zach's willingness to even engage in a conversation with them... "Diego?" He whispered.

"No, that deranged cat lady is 6 feet under." Both Aviva and Martin exhaled with relief at Zach's amused laugh. "And I sure as hell wasn't jumped by a ghost."

Yet Aviva didn't miss Zach's uneasiness. "Then why are you still afraid of him?"

The pale inventor sneered at her as if she had just insulted him, but instead of violent denial, he tapped his desk, a hologram appearing above it. "Because the technology I made for him was what they were after."

The blueprints of the reprogrammed suit flickered in the air, as well as several other crude attempts to replicate the creature power suits. Martin froze at the digital copies, eyes locked on the suit he remembered encapsulating his brother. He still remembered the smell of burning flesh as the EMTs peeled away the fried technology from his brother's skin.

"That suit was destroyed," Martin corrected in disbelief. "They can't steal something that doesn't exist."

"I still had pieces of the prototypes," Zach admitted with brief hesitation. Regret was edged into his tone. At Aviva's growl and curled fist he quickly added, "I was repurposing it for better command response with my Zachbots. Trust me I've had my fill of your stupid furry suits."

"If I had known you were hoarding cheap copies of *my* inventions I would have kicked your door in a lot sooner," Aviva hissed before Martin rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Everything I had was far from functional; It would take a miracle to get any of it running." Zach crossed his arms, though it looked a little awkward with the splint. "And If I knew that my involvement with him would've put such a target on my back I would've melted it down for spare parts a long time ago."

Zach swiped his hand through the hologram. The blueprints disappeared and a grainy image from a security camera popped up. The figure was hard to make out, almost fully encapsulated by the shadows of the room, but the slender build was an immediate distinction from Diego. "You can have access to my security logs or whatever if you're trying to track them down."

Aviva held out her creaturepod, downloading the data from the desks' hologram. She gave a suspicious glare towards the villain. "You're being awfully cooperative."

"I don't want this technology floating around any less than you do!" Zach barked, before softening his tone slightly, turning his chair so he was just out of eyesight. "And because... I'm sorry. I didn't know he was going to go that far."

Aviva lowered her aggressive stance in surprise and couldn't help but turn towards Martin who looked more conflicted.

He was by no means in the position to forgive Varmitech, nor hold him any less accountable, but Martin appreciated the acknowledgment of his intentions. His disgust and anger still burned brightly, but it was less intense.

He gave a sigh, ignoring Varmitech's words and instead motioned towards the elevator. "Let's go."

As soon as Martin and Aviva lost the robotic escort at the front door, they made their way back to the street where the Createrra was parked. "What do you think? Friend of Diego's, or competitor?" Aviva asked as they matched their steps down the sidewalk.

"I think we need to find Chris before he gets himself involved."

Notes:

A brief guest appearance from Zach Varmitech!

Thank you guys so much for reading. I appreciate all the kudos and comments! <333

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/146863999>)

Notes:

Welcome back to another chapter! I've been trying to gauge how long this fic is going to be, but I have not been sticking to how I divided the plot up in my outline...

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_4_endnotes\)](#).)

Martin steered the Createrra through traffic at a speed slightly higher than usual. With Aviva in the passenger's seat, carefully going through the information given by Zach, and a few bags of additional supplies in the back, Martin was relieved to be on their way back to the *Tortuga*. Finally.

Despite Koki keeping them constantly updated on the algorithm's findings, the older Kratt was itching to view the progress himself. He knew their task was equally important. The ship was running dangerously low on their everyday necessities, and with nothing to do but wait, now was the perfect time to get it out of the way. However, something felt incredibly wrong about grocery shopping while his younger brother was still MIA.

His worry for Chris had been building into a deep frustration. After everything they had been through, Martin simply couldn't comprehend why Chris felt it necessary to leave him in the dark.

After laying on the horn at a slow driver, Aviva nudged his shoulder, a not-so-subtle attempt at telling him to cool off.

"Sorry..." Martin mumbled, notably reducing their speed to the number plastered on the sign on the side of the road. "I just feel like we're opening a whole new can of worms here... I mean, is Zach's burglar really *our* problem?"

"I'd feel a lot better if I knew for certain no one was trying to replicate my suits again." Aviva scrolled through more blueprints, not taking her eyes off the creaturepod. "Besides, if this person knew about Zach's involvement, they certainly know about Chris'. He could be a potential target."

Martin let out a sigh, getting to the root of his animosity. "Do you think that's why he left?"

"I don't know, Martin..."

"We could've protected him..." Martin muttered, pulling off the road into the field where the *Tortuga* was currently parked.

"I don't think that's what he was worried about," Aviva commented truthfully, hopping out of the vehicle as it came to a stall in the garage.

As they brought the totes full of groceries up to the main floor, Koki greeted them, sitting in the same chair from when they had left. She was tapping a pen to her mouth as she watched the algorithm pull strings of data, trying to match even the smallest connection to the highlighted cities. By the look of the progress bar, it was nearly complete. Jimmy was seated next to her, a notepad in his hands with dozens of crumpled pieces of paper surrounding them. It didn't look like they'd had much luck.

"Varmitech still alive?" Koki asked absentmindedly, exhaustion and boredom laced her voice.

"Unfortunately." Aviva joked, setting down the bags of groceries which enlisted a joyful cheer from Jimmy. "He's pretty convinced Diego's dead, but someone's still chasing his legacy."

Plugging her creaturepod into the *Tortuga*, Aviva brought up the image Zach had shown them.

Koki had gladly accepted the distraction, turning away from her own screen to analyze it. "Hmm... it's not enough to run a facial scan on."

"It might be a long shot, but I was thinking maybe we could enhance the footage and try to get at least an accurate height, or *something*."

As Aviva and Koki began to debate the usefulness of the footage and what they could do to it, they were oblivious to the other screen pausing its search and flashing a small alarm.

As Jimmy and Martin looked over the information with questionable expressions, the redhead called for their attention and interrupted their monologue. "Does Wilbur mean anything to you guys?"

Koki blinked before quickly rolling her chair back towards the main screen. The map was flashing a beacon on a small mountainous town in southwest Canada. After pulling the connecting data, it listed an address.

"Wilbur, Canada... Diego, or rather one of his alias', Daniel, owned property there," Koki supplied.

Martin exhaled in relief. Finally... *something* to go after.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jimmy practically jumped out of his chair. His impatience nearly started Martin.

In his desperation to just *find* Chris, Martin neglected to really consider how the rest of the team was handling his brother's disappearance. On one hand, it was extremely comforting to know how much they cared, and the lengths they would go for each other, but on the other it made Martin even more guilty. Chris was *his* brother; *his* responsibility.

Chris running off felt like a reflection of Martin's failure in that aspect.

But Martin didn't have a lot of time to reprimand himself for his subpar brotherly skills as three other people were currently looking towards him awaiting instruction.

Like the good leader he desperately tried to be, he shoved down those thoughts and did everything he could to not let his insecurities be known.

"Jimmy, set us on a course for Wilbur. Koki, I need a satellite image of the property. Aviva, let's go through that footage one more time."

It was nearing sunrise when Chris started to hear it.

The coals of his fire barely glowed as they struggled to compete with the winds that had picked up throughout the night. And when even the faintest light began to filter into the sky, Chris was ready to pack up and continue on his search.

Unsurprisingly he wasn't able to relax for the entirety of the night. Luckily he's grown used to a shotty and unpredictable sleep schedule, so the two days without rest didn't phase him. If anything it only allowed him time to overthink his decisions.

Chris eventually concluded that if it came down to it... he would kill Diego. If not for the safety of his friends and family, but for endangered and innocent species around the world.

While preferably, he should be tried by a fair jury and properly punished for his crimes; Chris also knew the odds of getting the man into police custody cooperatively were slim to none.

Did it make his morals questionable that he almost didn't mind the likelihood of intentionally taking someone's life?

Chris could argue he's tried before, but his circumstances were a little more justifiable. His previous attempt could easily be considered self-defense. This was quite literally premeditated.

And maybe that qualified him as a bad person. *Maybe he wanted to be qualified as a bad person...*

And just like that the little voice of insecurity that he'd been shoving down with months of therapy came crawling right back up. That no matter how hard he tried, nothing would ever redeem him from the atrocities he committed in that suit. That his hands were stained with no hope of cleaning them away.

And maybe if he takes it just far enough, everyone around him will finally be able to realize it too.

It's what he deserves, isn't it?

After sitting in his self-destructive spiral for a considerable amount of time, a blizzard had begun to sneak up on him. At first, he thought it was just the howling wind, but nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a distinct laughter almost directly behind him.

Twisting around with so much force he landed on his ass, Chris scrambled back up to his feet as he darted his eyes around the empty landscape for the source.

As he caught his panicked breath and drank in his surroundings for any sign of life, he grew restless as nothing but his own self occupied the space.

Maybe his sleep deprivation was finally catching up to him.

Chris kept peeling annoying strands of hair from his face as he folded up the thermal blanket and stashed it into his bag. Even when he took a long swig from his canteen, did the pesky wind intervene.

He admitted he was in desperate need of a haircut, the length now curling past his ears into something akin to a mullet. Already struggling to accept the fact that half of his hair was white and showed no signs of reversing, he hated the way it looked. But considering he and sharp objects weren't exactly compatible at the moment, he had continued to put off getting it cut.

Nobody had commented on it, but he knew Martin was dying to do something about it. Chris was hoping he could avoid the conversation as long as possible so as to not bring up the intrusive thoughts that would accompany holding scissors anywhere near another person. And He didn't want to consider the atrocity of a haircut he would give himself if he attempted to do it alone.

But considering it was nearly blinding him as it whipped around in the wind, Chris fished a rubber band out of the backpack and tied the lower portion of his hair the same way Aviva did her own every morning and just prayed it didn't look entirely ridiculous.

If the sun had made any more progress in the sky, Chris would've been none the wiser as the wind continued to pick up and thick gusts of snow kept his range of eyesight extremely limited.

Accepting that he wouldn't do much out in the weather besides get hypothermia, he focused on finding some sort of shelter, but as he turned towards the rocky mountainside, where he was more likely to find some sort of cave or hole, his eyes caught on a shadowed figure hidden halfway behind one of the trees.

Doubling back in alarm, the figure was gone.

"Who's there?!" Chris yelled but it was swallowed by the wind. Despite it being in the opposite direction of any hope of shelter, he booked it to the tree line, shoving his way through the snow-heavy tree branches.

Panting, he darted his head around when another figure danced in the corner of his vision. Chris swore he caught a reflection of gold but when he turned completely it had once again vanished. He was only frozen for a moment, gathering the spike of fear and pushing it aside for the sake of reckless abandon.

He ran as fast as the wind's resistance would allow him. Shouldering through thick pine trees, with no attention to how some of the branches would scratch his exposed cheeks. The freezing air was stabbing as it rabidly entered his lungs,

drying out his lips, while his nose remained congested.

He only paused when he lost sight of the figure he was chasing, but an echoing chuckle or a flash of gold would kick him right back into his frenzy.

The property, as it turned out, was several acres worth of untouched land, of which they divided into four sections.

The Tortuga arrived around 8 in the morning, an unfortunate blizzard slowing down their travel. Martin tried not to let the delay dishearten him, as he was at least grateful the team had been able to find some time to rest.

Unfortunately, sleep continued to elude him, as he rehearsed their search plan over and over until it practically became his second language.

They landed the Tortuga in the middle of the property before splitting up to perform their own searches, keeping in close contact with their creaturepods.

Koki had advised their cautious check-ins to be every 10 minutes. Considering who the property belonged to, Martin had agreed, unsure of what dangers they could encounter.

“Aviva, checking in,” her voice sounded from the creaturepod strapped to the wrist of Martin’s blue jacket.

“Koki, nothing to report.”

“Jimmy Z, Nada.”

Martin frowned, looking around the eerily silent woods. They had been searching for over an hour, with not a shred of good news. Luckily the blizzard calmed to a light flurry, but the snowfall had covered any previous hope of potential tracks.

“Martin?” Aviva questioned, a slight hitch of worry etched in her voice.

“Sorry, yeah.” Martin quickly responded, “Nothing here.”

“See you in 10,” Jimmy commented, like every other time they had spoken, before ending the call.

Martin sat for a second in the returned silence, trying not to let the disappointment overwhelm him. Chris was here... he had to be.

And if he wasn’t, Martin was going to tear apart the continent until he found him.

Taking a deep breath, he continued on his designated search path once more.

He was definitely going insane.

Chasing echoes and shadows through the thickness of the wind, but when it had cleared to a gentle snowfall the forest had gone completely silent once again.

And as he took in his surroundings, standing dangerously close to a snow-capped cliffside, he accepted he was completely lost.

The small town he had traveled from was nowhere in sight, even from the slight vantage point.

Completely hopelessly lost.

“Dammit!” He let out a frustrated yell, listening to it echo into the valley he was standing over. He took a few labored breaths, scanning over the terrain as if the disturbance would somehow change his circumstances.

He briefly considered the insecto-copter still tucked away in his backpack. However, he had used most of the battery on his flight here and wanted to save what little remained for an utmost emergency.

Some would consider being lost an emergency, Chris was unfortunate enough to know there was worse.

Maybe it was all just some trick; a red herring that Diego set up before he died to bait Chris into chasing ghosts until he keeled over from hypothermia.

And like an idiot he had fallen for it quicker than a brick being dropped from a skyscraper.

Messing with his head even from the grave.

*He was still under the control of someone who wasn’t even **alive**.*

Chris worked himself up to the point of hyperventilating as he started pacing around in disbelief. Was this the goal all along? To keep Chris in a cycle of paranoia to the point he would become a danger to himself? To drive him into making decisions that would distance him from his family and taint the trust they had in him?

Chris paused, digging into this pocket before pulling out the small piece of gold that had started this entire endeavor.

Who's to say this is even real?

Maybe he's made the entire scenario up in his mind to deal with the resounding guilt that he had no way of resolving; trying to earn his forgiveness.

The doubt and conspiracies began to build in his mind until it was an incomprehensive egophony of noise.

And the shard in his hand began to feel like it was burning away at his flesh.

Chris clenched the shard so hard his knuckles turned white, and with a yell that bled of anguish and rejection he reared back his arm, throwing the small piece of gold with all the strength he could muster.

And for a moment he stood in that hunched-over position, panting as a few birds were startled out of their nests as his yell echoed through the valley.

It felt like he had failed again; wasted his energy on a meaningless endeavor that benefitted no one and only resulted in his own misery.

He almost crumbled into the snow, his exhaustion driving him to desire nothing but for the white to engulf him and bury any trace of his existence. But as he looked out into the horizon where the shard had just previously disappeared, the oddly specific shape of the mountain range's silhouette caught his attention.

The mountain on the far left was distinctly taller than the others, with an almost vertical slope on one side while the other had a gradual curl into the neighboring mountain.

He squinted, staring for a moment trying to understand its importance. His heart skipped a beat as he realized he *recognized* it.

Chris hastily dug into his pocket, ripping out the crumbled piece of paper and rubbing it smooth against his leg. When he got the paper sheet into a somewhat readable state, he held it up against the skyline.

Just as he recalled from one of his dreams... The silhouette was messily sketched into the paper. The few lines were almost indistinguishable from the range in front of him.

He *remembered* it.

He's been here before.

Chris' breath picked up again, this time in some sort of relief that he wasn't entirely crazy; that maybe what he was trying to accomplish was possible.

He scanned over his notes again, trying to gain some sense of direction from the mountain range. The other prominent memory included some body of water. Maybe a lake?

With how low the temperature was, any water would have surely frozen and built a nice layer of snow on top. Water always flows to the lowest point...

Something akin to excitement built in Chris' chest as he scanned over the valley. Even if he still didn't quite know what he was looking for, his instincts screamed at him to head into the valley.

So, with a new wave of purpose, he began to run.

He only made it a few feet when a shout halted him in his tracks.

"CHRIS?!"

Oh shit.

Notes:

Chapter 4: The one where Chris has a mental breakdown in the Canadian wilderness for several days

I'm trying not to go too slow, but also dive into the nitty-gritty of what's going through everyone's mind in this ongoing debate of whether or not Diego is alive... So, hopefully it's not getting to boring! I promise you'll get a more concrete answer next chapter!

Thank you guys again for reading and the continued support! I love reading your commentary!!! It makes me so happy I'm able to keep you guys engaged through this journey with me <333

(I know I say it every chapter, but I really do appreciate it!!!!)

Chapter 5 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/147345703>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_5_endnotes\)](#).)

During the team's last check-in, a casual conversation had started. Martin knew everyone's anxiety had been building the longer they went without any sign of Chris, and their company had been the only thing to calm it.

"I'm almost done over here, I'll probably meet up with you, Koki in just a bit," Jimmy announced, his breath slightly labored from hours of hiking.

Koki let out a small laugh, "I brought some extra granola bars just for you, Jimmy Z."

Martin was only partly paying attention as he was currently hiking up a fairly steep incline. The outlook above would provide a better vantage point, and he admitted he could use a short break as well.

Aviva had been mid-sentence in their call when a visceral yell pierced through the air, startling Martin into losing his footing for a moment.

"What was that?!" He unintentionally cut her off.

"What was what?" Aviva questioned, her conversational tone turned to worry.

"I just heard a scream..." Martin panted softly from the thinning oxygen at his altitude. Yet he sounded more hopeful than anything, "I think it was Chris."

"We'll head back to the Tortuga and meet up at your coordinates!" Koki announced.

Martin hung up without any further words, turning his attention fully to his surroundings. "CHRIS?!" He cupped his hands, yelling as loudly as his vocal cords would allow him.

With renewed energy, he jogged up the incline. He couldn't be sure of the exact source of the yell by the way it was reverberating through the valley, but he hoped the added elevation would at least give him a chance.

What he *wasn't* expecting was to jog around a particularly large boulder and collide with another body.

They both let out shouts of surprise as they fell back into the snow before Martin was able to shake his head and get his eyes on exactly whom he ran into.

"Chris?" This time it was more of a whisper of disbelief. Immediately relief washed over him and a wide smile broke out on his face.

Everything was going to be okay now.

"Martin!" Martin furrowed his brows as Chris sounded... alarmed.

They both scrambled quickly to their feet, aware of the tension building between them. Martin's previous relief began to morph into more confusion as Chris began to back away.

"Chris!" Martin stepped forward, quickly closing the gap between them despite his brother's jittery steps away. "Are you okay?! Are you hurt?!" He grasped hold of Chris' arms, quickly scanning over his body for any injuries. He took note of the shallow cut on his cheek and the general grime that clung to him that came with spending the night outside.

Chris fought off his hands almost as quickly as they were placed, unintentionally shoving Martin back a few inches. "What are you doing here?! You're not supposed to be here!" His eyes broke away from Martin, anxiously darting around as if expecting someone to jump out from the treeline.

At the venom in Chris' tone, Martin was taken back for a moment before his brows furrowing and returning the tone with his own, "What am **I** doing here?! Chris, what the hell are **YOU** doing here?!" He had momentarily forgotten his building grudge with his brother, but the clear dissatisfaction with his presence had broken Martin out of his relief.

"Oh, you know, just sightseeing." Chris' sarcasm was unwarranted, but that didn't stop it from slipping out. "Did you not read the note?"

"Yeah, I read your note, after almost having a fucking heart attack!" Martin hissed, unable to keep his voice from escalating. He had always prided himself on keeping a level head, even in the most tense situations. However, the worry and anxiety that had been building for days began to fuel Martin's temper. "Diego is *dead*, Chris."

"Okay, so you didn't read the note." Chris crossed his arms looking unimpressed.

Martin let out a disgruntled groan, rubbing his hands down his face. In a more exhausted and heartbroken tone, he muttered, "I thought we were finally moving on..."

Chris flinched, guilt starting to overtake his annoyance. He knew how badly this would affect Martin, he just didn't expect to have to confront it so soon. Chris could throw a fit all he wanted, but he was well aware of how much this would hurt their trust. He had honestly hoped it would. Maybe if he pissed them off enough they would actually stay away.

Martin was a very difficult person to upset. Insults rolled off him like water on a duck. He forgave people quicker than they forgave themselves. He was the one who made up excuses for other people's impertinence. He was empathetic to a point where more often than not it was self-destructive.

So to be the cause of Martin's deep frown was quite impressive.

This is what he wanted, wasn't it? So why did it hurt so much?

"I'm just trying to protect you, Martin." Chris broke with a sigh. He couldn't stand to see the sadness in his brother's eyes. Clearly, the brutal abandonment wasn't working, so he decided to try a little honesty. "He... He found me. He knows

where I am.”

Martin’s back straightened a little in alarm and he couldn’t help the way his eyes flicked around. “you’ve *seen* him?”

“Well... not exactly. Maybe?”

“Chris, a ‘maybe’ isn’t really gonna do it for me right now,” Martin looked unimpressed.

“He left me a warning,” Chris clarified, almost insulted that Martin didn’t believe him, but also understood the absurdity of it all. It wasn’t an hour ago that he didn’t even believe himself. “It was a piece of his mask.”

“Okay...?” Martin tilted his head expectantly, waiting for Chris to reveal said gift.

Chris blinked blankly for a moment, having a small internal crisis. “I uh... threw it off a cliff...” His voice trailed off as he realized how bad it sounded.

“*Oh my God*,” Martin whispered as he briefly turned away from Chris, letting out a shaky sigh. Emotion clouded his voice, and he was staring out into the scenery with a lost expression. “Chris, please don’t do this to me.”

“I’m not making this up!” Chris shouted, suddenly defensive. “Every second you’re near me you’re in more danger!”

“I’m not saying you’re *lying*, it’s just...” Martin turned back towards him with a conflicted expression. He chewed over his words for a moment, as if trying to avoid a negative reaction. “I know you’ve been really stressed, but maybe we should talk to your therapist”

“I’m not fucking crazy!” Chris was the one who closed the gap between them this time, making sure Martin could see the clarity in his eyes.

“I didn’t say that,” Martin held up his hands, but his tone was firm. He was concerned, but his words were genuine. Martin didn’t even want to consider the possibility of Diego being alive but trusted his brother enough to theorize the involvement of some third party. The thief from Zach’s security footage briefly crossed his mind. Before he could offer some sort of explanation to calm Chris’ paranoia, his brother continued.

“This is real!” Chris roughly dug into his pocket and shoved the wrinkled piece of paper into Martin’s chest. “I’ve been here before. Diego is here. I know it.”

Martin recognized the texture and size of the paper instantly; he had been staring at the book it originated from all night. His heart broke once more at the reminder of the horrors his brother was facing alone. The rest of his anger drained from him, unable to justify it knowing how big of a burden Chris was trying to carry.

He unfolded the paper, noting the description of the cabin and a couple of names listed at the bottom of the page. He now saw the rigidness in Chris that he first identified as instability was actually desperation. It didn’t matter if it was real; his brother truly believed in his motives. Martin could theorize a million different ways in which the guilt his brother had been oppressing manifested into some quest for redemption. Dead or not, Diego’s influence was still gripping Chris like a vice. Looking up from the paper, Martin met Chris’ eyes in some sort of acceptance laced with sadness.

“I need this...” Chris whispered. “Please...”

Martin nodded for a moment before choking out an, “Okay...”

At that point, it didn’t matter who was involved. If getting to the bottom of whatever was going on would help Chris be able to move on, Martin would move mountains to do so.

“Okay,” Martin affirmed again, watching the tension drain from his brother’s shoulders. “But I’m not letting you do this alone.”

“Martin-”

“No,” Martin gripped Chris’s forearms, mustering up the most serious face he could. “No more keeping me in the dark.” His hands moved to cup his brother’s frigid cheeks, the turmoil of emotions spilling over once more. “I was... I was so *scared*, Chris.”

Chris opened his mouth to respond but nothing seemed to come out; instead, he hung his head with a shame-filled frustration. His anxiety spiked in the back of his mind, warning him of the dangers, and flashing unwanted images of the many gruesome fates Martin had met in his dreams. But it seemed he was incapable of putting up a fight when his brother was practically crying in front of him.

Instead, Martin pulled him into an embrace, smothering Chris’ face into his shoulder with one hand cradling the back of his head while the other wrapped snugly around his back. He let out a shaky breath. Even though Chris did not return the embrace, he noticeably melted into the warmth of his brother’s arms.

“You’re such an idiot...” Martin whispered in a wet voice, though there wasn’t an ounce of hostility behind his words.

Chris let out an amused exhale, not really able to disagree.

A sudden gust of wind and the familiar humming of a turtle-shaped aircraft filled the air as the large vessel began to descend not far from where they were standing.

The Tortuga wasted no time in landing as close as possible when three figures hopped into the thick snow, charging towards them.

At the sight of their mix of worried and relieved expressions, Chris felt his heart clench. The closer they came, the more his chest tightened with anxiety.

After leaving them high and dry he almost expected a few choice words, but was surprised when he was hit full force by their engineer, arms wrapping around his neck with two more pairs not far behind.

"You're okay!" Koki squealed in relief.

"Dude, don't ever do that again!" Jimmy scolded, but the wide grin on his face suggested it was all in lightheartedness.

Chris felt his cheeks heat against the frigid air, and as much as he desired to bask in their embraces and quell all their fears, there was still a job to do. He made a pleading look towards Martin as if asking permission to pursue their agreement.

Martin gave a small nod, gently pulling the hug apart, and gaining the rest of the crew's attention.

Aviva looked between Martin's frown and Chris' stare of anticipation with building confusion. Their joyful reunion fell into a waiting silence. "What's going on?"

"Diego's alive," Chris offered.

"*Maybe*," Martin quickly finished, which earned him a small glare from his brother. "We're gonna check out a possible lead."

"I remember being here... In some sort of safehouse." Chris tried to avoid eye contact as he watched his friend's faces fall into uncertainty. The guilt bubbled up in his stomach, threatening to choke him, but his mouth was already moving and the words were already flowing out. "I-It was near that mountain range... I think."

A tense silence fell upon them, and Chris nearly jumped off the cliff right then and there when they all began to make glances at each other that he couldn't decipher.

This is it. He's done it. He's finally crossed the line.

Chris' shoulders hunched in on himself as if preparing to protect him from the rejection that would soon follow.

Instead, Aviva finally sighs, meeting his gaze with a look of sympathy. "There's a cabin on the property."

And Chris freezes. A part of him was still hoping they would be able to slap him with counter-evidence and pack him off to a psych ward. He's starting to feel like it would be better than the reality he was living in at this moment.

Unwilling to trust his voice, Chris gave a quick nod, pretending he didn't see the way Martin's face fell.

Having already mapped out the entire property, Aviva pulled out her creaturepod and led the way through the snow-painted woods.

By the time they approached the unsuspecting wooden structure, it had started snowing again. And as they peeked behind the wall of pine trees to the cabin, Martin felt a jolt of déjà vu run down his spine.

Suddenly the cabin was a dark and rusted warehouse, and the snowy terrain was the African Savannah. Except Chris was the one who tried to move without thinking, and Martin's arm shot out to snatch him before he even registered it had happened.

At Chris' look of annoyance, Martin retracted his arm, mouth opening and closing unable to verbalize his thought process. Regardless, he had caught everyone's attention. The oldest Kratt cleared his throat and stood up straight to address the team who had been uncharacteristically silent for the entire hike. "I think you guys should stay back, this could be dangerous."

"Pssh, as if." Koki scoffed, pulling a taser from her jacket pocket, and giving it a few test jolts.

As both Aviva and Jimmy retracted their stun weapons, Chris blushed furiously at his lack of preparedness. When Martin looked towards him in some expectation of self-defense, Chris merely hardened his gaze, hoping his confidence would count for something.

He already decided against pulling the survival knife from the pocket it was currently holstered in, not wanting to answer any questions that would come along with it. However, he hovered his hand over its hiding place. Should anything happen, he'd be the one to take the first swing.

With a sigh of disapproval, Martin waved them forward regardless. "Chris, stay behind me." With a pop, he slid the arctic wolf power disk into the center of his vest, thankful for the baby tooth he never left without these days.

The younger Kratt was inclined to simply nod, knowing he was testing Martin's limits enough even being here in the first place. For a moment, he deeply missed the comforting pressure of his creature power suit,

They all slowly approached the cabin, Martin leading them toward the door while the others fanned out to peer through the different windows. At the complete lack of movement or life, Martin felt braver about approaching the door, leaning against the side of the frame in case anyone decided to slam it open from inside.

He took a deep breath, and then another. Martin stepped back, quickly rearing his foot before kicking as hard as he could, hitting just under the knob.

The old wood splintered as the door went swinging inwards, breaking halfway off the hinges. The cabin shook for just a moment before it fell silent once more.

The crew stood waiting for several seconds, but no reaction came. Instead, they cautiously poured into the structure, only slightly warmer than the air outside.

As soon as Chris cleared from Martin's back he quickly drank in his surroundings, heart nearly beating out of his chest. It was exactly as he remembered.

His eyes met the animal skins that littered the walls and floor, then to the patched lumpy sofa, then to the wall of firearms, and finally to the small kitchenette with an out-of-place high-tech espresso machine. The only thing missing was the stranger tied to a chair and bloodied in the center of the room as he reared his claws back and-

He let out a shaky breath, "This is it..." He felt his knees lock, unwilling to move as the rest of the team began to explore the room. He changed his mind about the power suit, now grateful it was nowhere in his sight.

"The fireplace is ice cold," Koki announced, holding her hand to the soot-covered bricks.

Jimmy was looking through the kitchen cabinets, pulling out several canned and pickled foods. "No fresh stuff, only preservatives."

Aviva had made her way to a wooden desk, pulled open the file cabinet, and began sifting through the paperwork, coughing at the amount of dust she stirred. "I don't think anyone's touched this in a long while..."

Chris was already having another wave of doubt from his brother's disagreement, but was determined to stand strong on his theory now that someone else was trying to test it; ignoring how childish his stubbornness may come across.

At each comment, Chris felt his heart sink further and further, and soon he felt the room was spinning. Why would Diego lead him to an unused cabin? Was it all for nothing? Just another red herring?

Oblivious to his brother's spiral, Martin's attention was drawn towards a large standing wardrobe. The small golden knobs had glimmered, unlike most of the surfaces in the cabin. It was as if they had been polished. Or rather, glossed with the oil from a human's palm.

Martin slowly swung open the doors. As soon as the shadows parted, he heard his breath loudly hitch, echoing through the silent room. As he struggled to regain control of his lungs, he could hear the curious approaching footsteps of his team.

However, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the partly shattered golden mask that stared back at him.

Stepping back as the others froze in place, having gotten a glance at what surprised him so much, Martin ran a hand down his mouth in disbelief.

The Mask was missing large portions, with cracks webbing across the surface. It had been propped up, as if on display. As if it was meant to be found.

Chris was overjoyed in a twisted way; that finally there was *something* other than his unreliable mind. Something to prove he wasn't crazy, and he actually had a reason to be here; that he didn't drag everyone across the world on a spontaneous search party for nothing. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, and he almost did before Martin stormed away and turned his attention.

The blonde kicked the broken door on his way out with an exasperated yell, breaking it fully off the hinges.

It only took a moment and a few startled glances from the team before Chris followed hastily behind him.

Martin was standing a few feet from the cabin's porch, shin-deep in the snow, facing towards the woods with an expression Chris couldn't read. "This isn't happening..." He muttered as soon as Chris got close enough to hear.

Martin thought back and reenacted the memory in his head over and over. He'd seen it. He heard the way Diego's scream was engulfed by the air current. He felt when his balance tipped out into the open sky. He watched as he flailed helplessly, a truly paralyzing fear pitted in his eyes.

He was out here to help Chris. And Martin realized that his mind had contextualized 'helping Chris' as 'Proving everything was a coincidence to finally give him some peace of mind.' All he wanted was to bring his brother home and give him the safety of finally being able to *rest*.

And it didn't matter if Diego landed in the freaking ocean, there's no reasonable explanation for his mask to end up in a wardrobe in the middle of the Canadian wilderness unless someone had *found it* and *put it there*.

He never meant to brush off Chris' concerns. He just didn't want it to be real.

Yet, here they were.

"Martin?..."

Martin finally turned, his haunted eyes met the growing concern of his brother's. His selfless, brave little brother, who knew exactly what danger would find him, but dove headfirst into the first sign of trouble. He finally realized why Chris could never feel safe.

"This is why you didn't want to tell me," Martin guessed, already feeling embarrassed by his outburst that had probably frightened the team. "Isn't it?"

"I didn't want..." Chris frowned, glancing around the woods in contemplation of his answer before meeting Martin's gaze again. "I can't let anything happen to you."

At Martin's questioning expression, Chris continued. "I understand if you don't want to get involved, in fact, would prefer it... but I don't have a choice." He finished in a tired voice. "I'm sorry."

And Martin's face crumbled as he realized how his denial had come across as annoyance. His brother had run away to face the man who had kidnapped and tortured him for three months... and viewed it all as an *inconvenience* to his family.

At this moment all Martin could think to do was whisk his brother away and never let him out of sight again. He wanted to keep them far, far away from this whole mess, but he knew it would be the equivalent of putting a bandaid over a gaping wound.

Diego had made his vendetta intentions abundantly clear.

This wouldn't end by ignoring it. And as much as he wanted to, Martin couldn't protect Chris forever.

"He will never hurt you again." Martin was vaguely aware of the rest of the crew filing out onto the porch as he firmly clasped his hands on Chris' shoulders. "I'm going to make sure of it. I *promise*."

Chris studied his face for a second with a hesitant expression. He was almost dying to ask 'Are you sure?' Before stopping himself. Martin had never lied to him before. Still, Chris was having a difficult time comprehending it. It would be easier for everyone if Martin just turned him loose and allowed Chris to pursue this on his own. But something inside of him grabbed onto his brother's loyalty, recognizing the fear that consumed him the last few days.

He had to face the facts; he was struggling on his own. The paranoia and solitude had blinded him into making risky decisions. The team had been able to find the cabin before Chris with even more limited information.

Still, his stomach twisted at the thought of involving the people he cared about most, but from their continued pursuit of him, it didn't look like he had much of a choice.

Either they would chase him into the danger, or he could allow them to face it with him. And at least by his side, Chris would be able to ensure nothing would happen to them.

A small grin broke out on Chris' face and he gave a shaky nod. Though Martin picked up on the wave of anxiety behind his eyes.

As the team approached, Jimmy broke their attention by holding a red envelope. "This was behind the mask..." They all looked slightly disturbed.

Chris examined the blank envelope, carefully peeling it open. Inside was a firm piece of textured paper. He skimmed over the elegant script writing before glancing again in disbelief. "It's... an invitation?"

The team gave a collective "What?" as they crowded over Chris' shoulders to read the letter.

"The Association of Animal Enthusiasts cordially invites you to our annual masquerade gala?" Koki read the first few lines aloud as she skimmed it.

"It's made out to... a Diego Delgado..." Martin announced, skipping to the bottom.

"That's *ironic*." Aviva scoffed with hollow amusement.

"It's in a couple of days..." Jimmy pointed to the fancy lettering that highlighted the event's date.

Silence fell upon them for a few moments before Martin interrupted it. "Shoot, I need a new pair of shoes."

"What?!" Chris' eyebrows furrowed in confusion, as the rest of the crew gave him baffled expressions.

"For the gala!" Martin explained himself with outstretched arms as if it were obvious. "We're going to the gala!"

"Martin, this is obviously a trap..." Koki commented. "I've seen more subtly from a Zachbot."

"It's not a trap if you know it's a trap," Martin crossed his arms with a stubborn look. "Then it's just a face-off."

"Well technically-" Aviva was about to argue his logic before being interrupted.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Chris waved his arms in a stopping motion. Stunned that they could find it within themselves to be playful. "Do you guys not hear yourselves? This is *Diego* we're talking about. I can't ask you to be a part of this..."

"That's why you don't have to," Jimmy was quick with a gentle smile. "We're here for you whether you like it or not."

Chris felt his heart skip a beat as he quickly took in everyone else's loving expressions. When his eyes finally landed on Martin he was almost in disbelief by the pained look behind his eyes. He'd seen it before, usually when doing something dumb that Martin didn't agree with. It was like he was begging, 'Please let me help you.'

Even though Chris was considered more apathetic, damn if he didn't feel like he had just disappointed his biggest supporter.

Chris felt his eyes burn with unshed tears. Despite everything he'd done... under Diego's control and out of it... the fact his friends continued to look at him with nothing but admiration and love made his chest hurt with emotion. Despite how much he's *tried* to push them away. They continued to cross oceans to be by his side.

They'd never given up on him. Not for a second.

Not when he went missing, not when he nearly killed his brother, not when he begged them to, and not even when he flat-out abandoned them.

God, he felt like an ass.

Still, he wanted to keep them at arm's length. He wanted to shield them from the ugly situation he was entangled in. He'd give anything to make sure their hands never ended up stained like his. However, he couldn't deny how safe he felt standing alongside them, and how much the loneliness was slowly eating him alive.

He realized he was crying when Jimmy gave him a comforting pat on the back, and should probably say something before Martin acted on the worry behind his eyes.

Chris shrugged, slapping his hands back onto the side of his pants in stunned silence. "Let's get you some new shoes."

Notes:

Martin went through the 7 stages of grief within the span of 4k words, love that for him!

Ok, this is the last slow chapter fr. I promise next chapter things go down.

(For anyone who doesn't get the joke, "Delgado" basically means thin or dainty which is why Aviva found it funny)

Anyways! Thank you all so much for reading and all the delicious comments! I will see you all next Saturday :)
<3333

Chapter 6 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/147836668>)

Notes:

I'll be sure to give a reminder every time I do this but the tags have been updated!

There is a reference/implication of self harm in this chapter! No actual self harm takes place.

There is also alcohol, but no one gets drunk btw.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_6_endnotes\)](#).)

After their disturbing trip to the cabin, no one had argued when Chris refused to allow the Tortuga to take off before they figured out how Diego had known about their time in Venice.

"I just think we need to talk about this some more!" Martin attempted to quell the building tension in the ship's medbay.

"Either you take it out, or I'm getting it myself," Chris said sternly, hugging his arms anxiously over his bare chest.

"It's not that easy, Chris!" Aviva pleaded, continuing to examine the X-rays she had just taken.

After hours of prodding around his skin, and taking dozens of X-ray images, Aviva and Koki had located an anomaly. Much to everyone's horror, there had been a foreign object, about the size of a grain of rice, hidden snugly in Chris' right bicep. Without their careful examination of the images, it would have gone completely unnoticed.

They worked close enough with animals to recognize a microchip when they saw one. Chipping animals to study their behaviors in a non-invasive way was a widespread practice in their field.

"There's a reason most vets refuse to remove chips." Koki held up the tablet zooming in on the minuscule piece of technology. "This could've been inserted as long as 6 months ago, and your neuromuscular structure has clearly changed a lot since then."

"Between the months of muscle atrophy from overusing the suit, and the months you've been building that muscle back, they've grown over the chip." Aviva's brows were clenched in a deep worry about how Chris was handling the information. "I've already disrupted any signal it could've been sending, but I'm not a surgeon, Chris. I can't just... cut it out of you."

Chris huddled further into himself, trying not to let the storm of emotions cloud his judgment. He'd endured laying on the cold examination table with nothing but a pair of shorts without a single complaint. Even though the numerous scans and constant hands on his body had made every nerve feel like it was on fire. He let them examine every scar, every imperfection, and every reminder of how *different* he was, just to be told there was nothing they could do.

It was a *little* upsetting.

"Aviva may not be a surgeon, but she's the best engineer out there. There's no way Diego could regain access to that chip." Jimmy, who had been a silent comfort for most of the conversation, patted Chris on the back only once before retracting his hand again at the subtle tense of his overstimulated skin.

Martin knelt in front of the table Chris was perched on, “We can get you to a real doctor soon and let them take care of it, bro, I promise.”

Chris took a deep breath, shaking slightly as he exhaled it. “I don’t care if it’s a little messy or if I get a little muscle damage. I just need it *out*.” The frustration was clear in his voice as if they didn’t understand what he was trying to say.

They couldn’t understand the deeper meaning of that chip. Even if its function had been eliminated, its existence was invasive. It was like an invisible brand as if he belonged to Diego. As if he were an animal to be owned. Despite being hidden underneath his flesh, it was still *there*.

“It’s not the muscles I’m worried about; it’s the musculocutaneous nerve,” Aviva frowned. She raised her voice a little, desperate to get her point across. “If anything goes wrong, you could lose function of your entire hand! I just... I can’t take that risk.”

Already resisting the urge to claw at his bicep, Chris dug his fingernails further into his palms as a distraction. Probably the only thing stopping him from picking up the scalpel and doing it himself, was the reassurance of Aviva disabling its tracking capabilities. And the fact that he had just convinced them he was mentally stable and didn’t want to lose that label so soon.

At his dissatisfied expression, Martin sighed, “Can you guys give us a minute?”

The rest of the crew shared a knowing glance before shuffling out of the room, leaving the brothers to the empty medbay.

The silence was deafening. The air between them was still awkward from their interaction in the woods.

“What happened back in those woods-” Martin started, but his brother was quick to cut him off.

“I don’t wanna talk about it right now.”

With a sigh, Martin stood up from where he kneeled close by Chris’ side to walk over to the counter and grab Chris’ shirt. He handed it over as the younger hastily threw it on, his posture relaxing slightly as he did so. Chris’ arms went right back to cradling himself, bringing one of his knees up against his chest while the other continued to hang off the table.

Martin remained standing as he finally addressed his brother after their silent exchange. “I know you want to just get this over as quickly as possible-”

“Because I do.” Chris interrupted unapologetically causing Martin to shake his head slightly.

“While you were gone...” Martin paused, before deciding to jump to the important part, “Zach had a prototype of the Reprogrammed CPS.”

At that Chris froze, eyes caught on the tiles of the floor. Martin cautiously continued, “Said it wasn’t functional, but about a week ago... someone stole it.”

Chris remained unresponsive but he didn’t seem to be panicking.

“Aviva and I talked... We need to find that suit and make sure it’s destroyed. We’ve already agreed we need to do something about Diego, but You need to understand this isn’t *your* fight...” Martin stepped a little closer, “I know I can’t make you stay out of it... But I need you to look me in the eyes and tell me that you can handle this.”

Chris looked up in surprise, making uncomfortable eye contact. He had been mentally preparing to fight his brother to be involved and was not expecting to basically be offering a truce. His mouth quickly opened with an automatic response but Martin cut him off before any words could come out.

“If we go to that party, and Diego is *there* ... I need to know that it’s not going to break you.”

Drowning in Martin’s pleading expression, Chris actually took the time to consider it. Most of his courage in the woods had come from a place of sheer desperation. And despite how he convinced himself he was okay with handling Diego... At that moment it had felt like his only option. For some reason, it felt infinitely easier to accept their help with the additional knowledge of the stolen creature power suit. As if the involvement of the suit turned the situation from a personal issue to a team issue.

It wasn’t just Chris who was at risk anymore. If Diego had access to another suit, so many innocent creatures would be in harm’s way. That was something the Wild Kratts couldn’t turn a blind eye to.

Aviva was fiercely defensive of her technology, even more so after recent events. There was no stopping her involvement if her creature power suits were in the mix. Chris knew deep down it wasn’t the case, but it just felt so much more justifiable for his team to get involved because of the *suits* instead of *him*.

Risking their lives for the technology made *sense*. It was proven dangerous in the wrong hands, and the entire crew felt responsible for any harm that could come from their research tools.

If it had just been about petty revenge and anger, and Chris’ inability to move on... he didn’t know if he could stand to put them all through it. It wouldn’t be worth it. Because *he* wasn’t worth it.

But Chris didn’t think he would be able to sit back and watch them handle it either. He felt too involved, too responsible to allow them to get involved without him.

Even with the additional footing of the power suit, Diego still felt like *his* responsibility.

So, no, it wouldn't break him. Because it couldn't.

Chris' eyes met with Martin. "I can do this."

Martin held the contact for a few moments, studying his brother's expression for the slightest of cracks. Once he seemed satisfied with his answer, he added, "If we're doing this, we're doing it my way. As in, no more of this lone-wolf behavior. We're making a plan, and we follow my lead. Got it?"

"Got it," Chris whispered, simultaneously making the unspoken promise to protect his friends at any cost.

"Okay..." Martin finally said with a finalized tone. The seriousness melted off of his face into a warmth that Chris was more accustomed to. He sat next to Chris, pressing their shoulders together. "I'm going to make sure you can finally come back in one piece. I promise."

Call Chris hopeful... but when his older brother spoke with so much confidence, it was hard not to believe him.

"Diego Delgado..." Koki kicked off their huddle with the case file she had been slowly putting together on the man who plagued them for half a year. "I haven't been able to find anyone under the legal name that matches our guy, so it's most likely another alias, possibly his favored one. However, the Association of Animal Enthusiasts is very familiar with Mr. Delgado for his frequent donations."

"I've been looking into the A.A.E; it seems to be a pretty legitimate organization..." Koki displayed her research on the main screen as the crew had once again gathered around the console. "It's got some pretty solid history here in the United States, and most of the investors are people genuinely looking to protect wildlife."

"Most?" Jimmy caught the keyword.

"It's unfortunate that some of the organization's funds seem to be the product of money laundering. Diego, and possibly a few other investors may be conducting illegal business using the A.A.E as a cover. It's unclear if the president of the association is aware of it, or if he's just turning a blind eye for the sake of funding." Koki answered.

"Which means the rest of the guests at this gala are probably innocent and unaware of anything Diego is planning..." Aviva muttered in slight disgust. "He's using them as shields."

"What I don't understand is why he would need to," Chris piped up from where he was staring long and hard at the warm mug of tea in his hands. It felt good to finally get the questions plaguing his mind into the open. "He knew exactly where I was for the past three months... Why would he need to use the party as cover? Why not just... come find us. We thought he was dead, there's no way we would've been prepared."

The team sat in silence at the grim scenario. It was scary for them to think of the alternative, but despite their gratefulness, no one could come to a reasonable conclusion for Diego's puzzling actions.

"This whole thing smells fishy..." Jimmy muttered, sinking into his chair.

"It doesn't matter." Martin picked up the invitation. "We know exactly where he's going to be and when, if we don't take this opportunity, who knows how long it could take us to find him again."

"And if he really does have the suit..." Aviva brought up the security footage from Zach's plane. "It's only a matter of time before he finds a way to get it operational... or worse."

The mystery thief had continued to remain unsolved, though, without any clear connections to Diego, their most solid guess had been some hired assassin. Just another oddity in Diego's lack of direct involvement.

"The goal right now should be to safely escort him away from the civilians, before notifying law enforcement," Martin announced. "Getting the police involved too soon could risk the A.A.E to cancel the party entirely. And we're well aware of how quickly he can disappear."

"He's not going to let us just drag him outside, is he?" Koki questioned hopefully.

"He might go willingly if he thinks he has what he wants," Chris whispered, staring into his reflection in the tea. "He may have a suit, but he still needs someone who can operate it."

"Absolutely not." Martin quickly shoots down the idea, somehow already knowing exactly what his brother was proposing.

"I'm just saying!" Chris looks up defiantly, "If we want to keep the rest of the guests safe this is the best way to do that!"

"That's a stupid plan and we're not doing it!" Martin frowned, crossing his arms.

The rest of the crew blinked with confused expressions. "What are we not doing exactly?" Aviva questioned.

"A really good idea-"

"Letting Chris use himself as bait-" Martin said simultaneously as his brother.

“Wait, Chris... you might be onto something.” Koki tapped her chin in thought.

Martin’s jaw dropped at Koki’s agreement. “I *just* said!-”

“No, listen!” Koki waved her hands to cut him off. “Diego’s expecting all of us, right? It’d throw him off pretty hard for Chris to show up alone.”

“Or maybe, exactly what he wants!” Martin pleaded.

“If Diego thinks he’s alone, he may lower his guard.” Aviva pointed out, thoughtfully considering Chris’s suggestion despite Martin’s adamant refusal. “It’d be infinitely easier to set a trap for Chris to lead him right into.”

“Uno reverse Diego’s trap, with our own trap!” Jimmy affirmed.

“Are you guys serious?” Martin looked around the console in disbelief. “There’s no way I’m letting Chris anywhere near Diego alone!”

“Well, it’s a good thing he won’t be,” Aviva smirked with a knowing expression, causing Martin to raise his eyebrow. “It’s a masquerade party, remember? The plan writes itself.”

Everyone’s puzzled expressions slowly morph into realization.

The next two days passed by in a blur.

Saturday had arrived, and as the sun began to set, Chris sat on his neatly made bed, staring at the detailed gazelle mask in his hands.

While Aviva and Koki worked overtime on additional security to the suits and gadgets, Martin had essentially sidelined him to catch up on some rest, and get himself cleaned up. That involved being nearly restrained for half an hour while Martin and Aviva fixed his outgrown mane. In the end, he was grateful to at least not look homeless anymore. Having taken an overly indulgent hot shower, he was probably the most physically put-together he’d been in months. However, he wasn’t so lucky in the resting department. The little amount of sleep he managed to get was restless and had him waking up more tired than when he went to sleep.

He claimed to be okay with it; he was the one who made the suggestion in the first place. But the closer the clock ticked to 6 PM, the more he felt nauseous spiking anxiety in his gut.

He’d be okay. He promised Martin he would be.

And Chris had no doubts about his team’s extensive planning. He hadn’t exactly been present in all of their meetings, but he’d seen the whiteboard. They’d planned a contingency for any possible scenario. All he had to do was convince Diego he was vulnerable and alone.

By the way his hands trembled slightly as he pulled on a pair of dark gloves that were short enough to curve around the middle of his hand, it wouldn’t be very hard.

The forest green suit had been an unused item in his closet for several years now, having only worn it once, which was to his college graduation. Though the additional cut of fabric that extended on the back of the jacket in a diamond shape to resemble a tail was a recent addition. The dress shirt underneath was a darker green, almost black, and was left slightly unbuttoned. He figured if he was going to be social with his abuser today, he’d rather not be choking on a tie simultaneously.

He may get a few odd looks, considering the party was an excuse for wealthy animal enthusiasts to make elaborate costumes to disguise themselves as if it were a cosplay convention. But luckily, it was his job to stand out.

The others, however? Chris had only seen their disguises a few times, but he barely recognized them with the overly jeweled accessories and intricately detailed masks.

Aviva had done an outstanding job with the animalistic features of the masks. No one had any doubt, considering she designed functional creature power suits for them on a daily basis.

When she had approached him about his costume, it had been Chris who suggested the gazelle. While being one of his favorite creatures, he couldn’t resist the irony of it. Thinking back to the amount of times he’d been chased by Blur adorning the gazelle power disk, it seemed only fitting to try and bait Diego with it too.

The swish of his door opening drew Chris’ attention to his brother.

“Hey!” Martin greeted with a stiff smile. He was nervous.

He was currently wearing only the suit of his costume, a navy blue suit with a sky blue button-up. The sleeves were delicately embroidered with a wing-like pattern and his left shoulder had a clip where a flowing feathered cape would be attached.

“Hey,” Chris returned the greeting, exhaling in annoyance as his brother bent over to button up the last few buttons of his green shirt and fix his collar.

“You ready?” Martin asked as he opened his nightstand, grabbing a few power discs out of their hiding place.

At the reminder of the green power suit hidden snugly under his shirt, Chris awkwardly adjusted it a little. He was trying hard not to think about it too much, considering the plan only involved him using the suit if things went sideways,

but Aviva had been extremely reassuring in her ability to remotely disable the suit if *anything* were to happen.

“Born ready,” Chris muttered, the lack of enthusiasm in his voice was telling. He stood up, meeting Martin’s conflicted gaze.

“You know we’d never force you to do this.” Martin placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, “Just say the word and we’ll stop right now-”

“No, no... I can do this.” Chris met his eyes hoping he looked more confident than he felt. “I need to do this.”

“I’ll be right there the whole time.” Martin squeezed his shoulder before letting go. “He won’t be taking you anywhere, I promise.”

Chris took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before fixing the green gazelle mask over his face. “I trust you.”

They parked the Createra a small distance from the cliffside manor where the gala was being hosted to avoid standing out amongst the luxury vehicles. As Aviva and Martin adorned the finishing touches of their outfits, Chris undid the top two buttons of his shirt again.

Aviva was wearing a floor-length strapless gown. It was purple, mimicking the pelt of a caracal. She had velvet gloves in a deep purple color that came up to her forearms. She also had bright purple jewels sewn into the fingers mimicking claws, but from the way she delicately draped Martin’s cape over his shoulders, Chris could tell they were entirely functional. Her hair had been pulled into a tidy bun with strands of hair curling around her face. Her lips were a deep red, but her eye makeup was mostly hidden by the caracal mask over the top portion of her face.

By the time Martin shimmied the falcon mask onto his face, they looked like two entirely different people. Chris would have a hard time picking them out in a crowd if he wasn’t so familiar with them to recognize them based on their mannerisms alone.

Despite Koki and Jimmy already on the other side of the manor, he could hear them clearly through the small device in his right ear.

“We’re all set in here,” Koki announced. She had been in a fitted black suit with a fox mask that covered her entire face and her hair pulled into a chunky bun atop her head,

“In position,” Jimmy called out next, adorning the same exact suit with a red otter mask. Despite the blandness of their outfits, they blended in perfectly with the rest of the staff that constantly patrolled the large ballroom, providing food and drink to the guests, making them essentially invisible. “No sign of the cat yet, you are clear to enter.”

Aviva, Martin, and Chris began to fan out among the stream of people as they approached the sidewalk leading to the entrance of the gala, staying within sight but not close enough to be lumped into a group. The sidewalk led directly to an outside courtyard, lit up with dozens of fairy lights. Hedges had been masterfully trimmed to resemble horses, bears, and wolves. Just past the hedge barrier, the yard dropped off into a cliffside, coastal rocks littering the bottom with waves gently licking the foundation. With only a flimsy rope fence to act as a barrier, Chris couldn’t help but think that was a disaster waiting to happen.

In the middle of the courtyard on a small platform, a violinist and cellist played a gentle melody, which lay like a blanket over the constant chatter of the guests.

Chris had previously considered the courtyard to be overly extravagant and packed with too many people, but when he stepped through one of the many 12-foot glass doors leading inside, he froze at the sight.

The ballroom was larger than the Tortuga itself, with a ceiling that made him dizzy to look at. A chandelier that probably cost more than his college tuition shimmered, and reflected all the light in the room that was practically encrusted in gold. The floors were a checkered marble tile, with a cream white and a darker gold, and as he glanced out into the sea of dresses coated with feathers and fur, he felt a spike of anxiety.

Facing Diego? No problem. Socializing? Well that’s where he draws the line.

He forced himself to take a step into the room when he realized he was standing in the way of the door. Walking deeper into the room he made subtle glances where he could pick out Aviva and Martin among the crowd. They were right beside him, just where they promised they’d be.

Still he swiftly grabbed a tall skinny glass of whatever liquid courage the waitstaff had on his platter while passing him, and chugged it in one gulp before setting the empty glass on the tray of yet another passing masked waiter. He only cringed slightly from the way it burned his throat and purposely ignored the annoyed glare Martin was surely sending him.

Glancing up again he noticed a balcony that seemed to wrap around the room. People were leaning against the railing, looking over the people with a pompous attitude as if they were ants. When Chris turned enough he finally spotted a grand set of stairs, coated in a red carpet. There were two larger staff at the foot of the steps, preventing anyone from wandering up them.

That was for the VIP.

And as a generous donator, there was no doubt Diego thought of himself as anything less.

"I'm going up." He seemingly said into the air.

Martin's voice in his earpiece responded. "Stay where we can see you."

Koki was already grabbing a tray of Hors d'oeuvres and making her way to the stairs. "I'll be right behind you."

As Chris approached the gala's equivalent of bouncers, their eyes bore into his from behind their matching doberman masks.

"Christopher Kratt," Chris announced as he finally stood in front of them. "Mr. Delgado's plus one."

He was almost expecting them to scoff and turn him away, but his stomach dropped further with anxiety when the doberman parted ways, allowing him to pass without a word.

He felt his anxiety climb with every step, and by the time he reached the top he was breathless from the lack of air he was allowing into his lungs.

He slowly made his way around the balcony, thankful for the lack of a crowd. He drew several eyes as he passed, his outfit standing out like a thrifted suit compared to the elaborate outfits fitted with animalistic prosthetics and encrusted with gems and precious stones. He thought the outfits downstairs were over-the-top but these were similar to something one would see in a dystopian film.

His eyes were carefully scanning his surroundings, as the classical music and gentle hum of conversation were like a muffled static due to the earpiece in his only functional ear.

He nearly tripped over himself as his eyes met with the back of a gold embroidered suit with a large furred scarf draping around his neck, sitting only a few yards in front of him in a cushioned red and gold seat. A mask covered most of his face, and despite not being able to see the front, the furred ring surrounding it was unmistakable for what it was supposed to represent.

Chris didn't realize he had stopped dead in his tracks, until his eyes met with a peregrine falcon mask, in direct eyesight from below, who gave him an encouraging look. Martin had parked himself at one of the bars, sipping something out of a wide-rimmed glass. To any passerby, he seemed to be enjoying the scenery of the party, but Chris didn't need to see his eyes to know they were trained on him exactly like the animal he was dressed as.

With a deep breath, he took another step, and then another.

The sound of the party faded out, replaced by the rapid beating of his own heart. As he stalked closer, he felt a sense of déjà vu. And for just a flash, the constricted suit on his skin was made of spandex and mechanisms and he was clutching a piece of jagged metal, approaching with the desperation of a cornered animal.

He physically jumped as a voice pierced through the static.

"Gatito... I was wondering when you'd show up."

Notes:

GUYSSS IM SO EXCITED!! THIS AND THE NEXT CHAPTER WERE ACTUALLY SUPPOSED TO BE ONE BUT IT GOT SO LONG I HAD TO SPLIT IT INTO TWO. THEY WERE MY ABSOLUTE FAVORITE TO WRITE AND IM SO EXCITED TO BE SHARING THEM WITH YOU!!!!

This has divulged SO far from wild kratts canon its not even funny.... anyways I don't even care I'm having so much fun writing silly stories with angst and drama and GALAS!!!

I hope you guys enjoyed! Thank you all so much for the continued support, I appreciate it so much!!! It keeps me so motivated and excited to release these chapters. I love seeing everyone's reaction and talking about this AU is my obsession rn. OUGH im so grateful for you guys...

Till next week... <3

Chapter 7 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/148328863>)

Notes:

BEGGING YOU ALL TO LISTEN TO "Who is She?" by I Monster WHILE YOU LISTEN TO THIS CHAPTER PLEASE IT WILL MAKE UR EXPERIENCE 100000x BETTER

(it's also on my reprogrammed playlist, shameless plug if you want to give it a listen:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2Tq7bmpDv4CcSqYZW7VOHv?si=688542176f0d49de>)

Oh also! I've gotten some questions about the "Gatito" thing, and I wanted to clarify it's not like... Discord Kitten type of pet name.... Diego is basically just calling him weak and defenseless. and since he only uses the cat suits, he refers to him as a baby cat. He's just patronizing him

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_7_endnotes\)](#).)

"The hell did he just call you?..." Martin's voice buzzed in his ear, but Chris barely acknowledged it as Diego spoke again.

"You're late."

"Parking was a nightmare." Chris shakily supplied, though his heart wasn't really in the joke.

Chris was only a few feet away, staring at the back of the man who had called out to him. "I saved a seat just for you." Diego didn't turn, but he motioned to the chair in front of him.

Chris tried to shake the emotion from his face as he silently stalked past Diego to sit in the seat offered to him. He took his sweet time soaking in the surroundings to avoid facing the man before him. There was a small ottoman between them, a chess board with marble playing pieces laid on it. The game had already been in play, with the pieces staged around the board. The white side, which had faced Chris, seemed to be at an advantage. Next to the board was a whiskey glass; by the rim of condensation on the table, it had been sitting there for some time.

His eyes finally trailed up to the Lion mask, boring into him with an unsettling grin. The mask wasn't shiny or made of gold, instead, it was an embroidered fabric mask, with beads and gems sewn into it and a ring of hopefully faux fur surrounding it.

Chris' attention was immediately caught on the jagged and uneven skin that wrapped around the right side of his face and trailed down his neck. The discoloration and stretched appearance were akin to a severe burn scar. He noticed how the right corner of his smile didn't stretch quite as far as the left. Taking in the rest of his form, Chris also noticed a leather glove present over his right hand, but not the left and a golden cane had been leaning against his chair.

Diego wordlessly brought a cigar to his lips, and when he flicked the lighter to life, his right arm trembled as if it didn't have the strength to even grip the metallic lighter.

For some reason, it surprised Chris. Something about Diego always felt untouchable, like a demon who had crawled from the underworld specifically to torment him. But glancing over his form now it finally clicked with Chris. He fell out of a fucking plane.

Diego never came after him because he *couldn't*.

He was *weak*.

"You shouldn't smoke. It's not good for you." Chris couldn't think of anything else to say as he stared dumbfounded at his realization.

Diego burst out in a deep chuckle that ended in a rattling cough, only further confirming Chris' suspicion. "Don't lecture me, Christopher." He simultaneously moved one of the black pawns on the board, motioning for Chris to follow suit. "I know quite a few people who are betting on it shortening my lifespan."

Chris looked down at the board for a moment, cautiously moving one of his own pawns. "Why did you invite me here?" He cut straight to the chase, knowing Diego would dance around the conversation until Chris initiated it.

"You have something I want. Why else?" Diego shakily moved another piece. He chuckled a little to himself before staring at Chris for an uncomfortably long time. "Where's your guard dog? I'm surprised he let you off your leash."

Chris bit his lip at the insult to his brother but restrained himself from glancing down at the bar in fear of giving him away. "This is between you and me, Diego. They don't need to get involved with this." Chris captured one of Diego's bishops, setting it aside.

"How noble." Diego continued the game in front of them without skipping a beat.

The smirk on his face had made Chris' chest swell with accomplishment. As long as Diego believed he had the upper hand, everything would go according to plan.

"And also very ironic." The lion finished with a drag of his cigar. At Chris' questioning look, he motioned to Chris' attire. "You approach me alone as a gazelle, a prey that relies on the safety of the herd to escape predators."

"You're one to talk." Chris scoffed, feeling the anxiety melt away in the comfort of his knowledge of zoology. "Lions are hardly the most dangerous predator on the African Savannah. Their hunting success rate is only around 30%, and typically rely on the strength and number of their pride for survival." He looked up almost smug as he took another of Diego's pieces. "It's a shame you don't play nice with others."

Diego gave a hearty laugh at that and continued on with the game.

Martin took another small sip of his drink, scanning over the party before looking back up to the balcony where his brother was seated.

“Well, I’m glad Diego’s getting a kick out of this,” Koki grumbled in his earpiece. Thanks to Chris’ proximity, they had been able to make out both ends of the conversation clearly.

Martin was about to make a comment when a woman suddenly appeared next to him, ordering some sort of cocktail from the bartender. She cheekily made eye contact with him “You look bored. Would you like some company?”

Martin blinked at her forwardness. She was tall, with sleek black hair that was pulled into a high ponytail. Some of the loose strands curled around her tan face that was mostly hidden by a jeweled tiger mask. Her striped dress had thin straps and an extremely low cut that Martin diverted his eyes from as she leaned with her gloved elbows on the counter. By all accounts, she was incredibly beautiful, but an unwanted distraction.

Under normal circumstances, Martin would’ve loved the offer of a conversation. Meeting new people, and learning intricate details of their lives was one of his favorite pastimes. Though with his current focus being broken, all he felt was annoyance. “I’m just enjoying the music,” He hinted bluntly.

Martin couldn’t help but tear his eyes away from her for a moment, just to make sure Chris was still seated exactly where he was supposed to be. Thankfully, he could still hear their conversation through his earpiece.

“The viola is slightly off-tune,” The tigress hummed, she seemed content with his dry response.

When Martin turned back to not be caught staring, he took another quick swig of the drink he had been nursing. He noticed a bit of carbonation that he had reasoned he was too focused to taste earlier, cringing a little at the bitterness. This time he didn’t respond, praying she would think him rude and stalk off to another victim.

Instead, she scooted closer, taking a long sip of an olive martini. “Are you going to ask me to dance like a real gentleman, or what?” She purred.

“I’ve got just about every exit sealed.” Aviva’s voice buzzed in his earpiece. “If Diego wants to walk out of here, it’s gonna be through the front door.” While the partygoers had gorged themselves on food and conversation, Aviva stalked silently through the halls of the manor, reinforcing every entrance to the ballroom besides the glass doors to the courtyard. And hopefully, no one would try to stray too far from the party to notice before it was time.

Jimmy had parked himself in the courtyard, serving guests to continue to blend in. “The trap is in place and ready to go. Chris, whenever you’re ready, bring him this way.” The electromagnetic cage Aviva had put together was thankfully something she had already been working on for months.

She had seen a need for a humane way to catch frightened animals who were in need of treatment or rescue, without the risk of harm to people or the animal. Inspired by Zach’s force fields that he had used to detain them several times, It was essentially a safety bubble that would encapsulate a species when activated. Martin had been referring to it as the Pokeball, and it unfortunately stuck until she could come up with an official name.

Repurposing it to hold a human’s size and weight had been a piece of cake. With the limited time, she was unable to test it as extensively as she wanted to. She just prayed it would hold long enough for the authorities to arrive, and no civilians would be caught in the crossfire.

As she walked the empty halls, hearing the music muffled by the walls, Aviva was surprised to turn a corner and pass a guest who was walking in the opposite direction.

Her round face and petite frame made her look young, with hair so short, it barely curled past her ears. It was slicked back with some sort of gel, outlining the shape of her head. Her dress was printed with a cheetah’s pelt and had a single strap around one of her shoulders. The sides were cut open, and a long slit ran up the legs of the gown. The matching cheetah mask was jeweled and reflected the light of the hallway as she tilted her head.

They made a brief eye contact as they passed, Aviva scrunching her brows at the firm smirk across her scarlet lips, but thought nothing of it as they both continued on their paths.

“A better question is…” Diego was down to only three pieces, his king, queen, and a rook. “Why did you come?”

“Because you threatened me and my family.” Chris scoffed, barely paying attention to the game at this point, but rather making moves without thinking. Diego had been trapped in a corner, and he could see checkmate in two turns. “Why don’t we take this outside and I’ll show you how the suit really works.”

Diego fell into another fit of laughter, harder than the last, leaving him wheezing and coughing into a handkerchief he had pulled from his pocket.

Chris felt himself freeze for a second in unease. Had Diego been the one to finally lose it? The odds were stacked so far against him it was obvious. In his current state, They probably wouldn’t even need to restrain him.

So what the hell was there to laugh at?

As if sensing his unease, Koki dared to come closer, stalking from behind Diego with a glass of whisky and replacing the one with the melting ice. She busied herself with wiping the condensation off the table and cleaning his ashtray for an

excuse to stick around for a few minutes.

With the comfort of her close proximity, he continued, "Thinking of a good joke?" Chris tried not to let the nervousness creep into his voice.

"Hardly." Diego wheezed a final time into the handkerchief and it came back speckled red. He cleared his throat a few times before continuing. "You told me I don't 'play nice' with others. I thought our brief time working together had gone well, but maybe you'd prefer a second opinion?"

Chris' shoulders tensed a little in confusion and quickly flicked his eyes in the direction of his brother for comfort.

Only... the spot was empty.

"Just as a gazelle is without his herd... a lion is nothing without his pride."

Chris risked a few more glances, trying to pick out the blue feathers anywhere within the corner of his eyes. Before feeling a swell of panic and didn't care anymore that he was actively searching the ballroom in front of Diego.

*Where the **fuck** was Martin?*

"Tell me, Chris..." Diego's tone deepened into a flat serious voice. As Chris was frantically spying the room, Diego moved his queen, knocking the white king piece from the board entirely. "Am I a dangerous predator now?"

Finally, it clicked.

Chris jumped to his feet, pressing hard against the earpiece "DIEGO'S NOT ALO-"

Before he could finish, Diego moved at a speed he didn't think was capable; grabbing his gold cane before cracking it against Koki's face.

A loud scream silenced the room as a fox-masked figure fell from the balcony, landing hard on a clothed table stacked with food.

The guests gasped in shock and the band immediately paused their melody and for a single second it was entirely silent,

And then all hell broke loose.

As Chris gaped at Koki, peeling herself off the broken table, Diego swung the cane again, making a solid connection to Chris' temple, sending him topping off the edge as well. He just barely managed to catch the trim and save himself the fall, his gazelle mask shattering as it hit the floor instead.

The guests were all-out panicking at this point, some fleeing, while others were flocking to Koki for assistance.

"I've lost visual of Martin!" Chris managed to bark, squinting his eyes from the pounding in his skull. "Koki's down!" By the time Chris managed to pull himself back up, Diego was nowhere in sight. "Fuck!"

Jimmy's panicked voice crackled in his earpiece. "What the hell is going on in there?! Aviva, should I still activate the trap?" After a beat of silence, his voice was even higher "Aviva?!"

The loud crack of several gunshots rang throughout the room, as Diego limped towards the exit, pistol in one hand, and aimed at the ceiling in an attempt to get the crowd to part ways. Of course, this only sent them running in more blind panic.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck-" Chris continuously muttered as he raced across the balcony, dodging the numerous guests who were in his way. "Martin, what's going on?! Where are you?! Aviva?!" He cursed again at the lack of response. As he ran, he spotted Diego amongst the frightened crowd, flooding to outside as they realized the rest of the doors were locked. "Jimmy, Diego's heading your way!"

After flying down the steps, 3 at a time, Chris made a small stop at where Koki had landed and was currently holding a hand to her nose that gushed red. A few other staff were helping her to her feet. When she saw him approaching, she began to wave her available arm towards the door, "Go! I'll be fine!"

Jimmy jumped, as the hoard of people began to pour from the doors, shouting as they fled in every direction. He held the firearm-shaped device in his hand that would rapidly expand upon impact with whatever he launched it at. And attempted to search the crowd to take aim, but it was impossible to make anything out amongst the sea of fabric and patterns. "I can't see him!"

Chris shoved his way through the crowd, spotting Diego's back as he leaned against the cane with one arm and took aim with the other. The pistol was targeted through the crowd at a certain redhead who was frantically turning his head.

"Get down!" Chris charged, ripping his button-down open to access his creature power suit. The coyote power disc was already ready in the slot, and he was quick to touch the tuft of fur he had pinned to the inside of his jacket in case things went south.

And at this point, he wasn't sure how much further south things could possibly get.

Jimmy had finally spotted Diego, and it was unfortunately by staring down the barrel of the pistol in his hands. Reacting on instinct, Jimmy fired off the electromagnetic field, squeezing his eyes shut as he did so.

A blur of green tackled Diego with a snarl just as he shot off the gun, causing the field to catch nothing but air as it expanded. Simultaneously the bullet went wide, missing its target but still causing another round of screams from the

people still trying to flee.

Chris went to bite down on Diego's shoulder, letting the instincts of the suit guide him through the chaos, but when his teeth were met with a jarring solid metal, he reeled back in surprise, giving Diego the opportunity to shove him off with a yell.

Chris scrambled back, wiping his mouth. His eyes met momentarily with a frightened pilot who seemed to be frozen in shock. "Go find Aviva and Martin! Diego has backup!" Jimmy shakily nodded before sprinting past them, jumping over a knocked-over table before ducking into the mostly empty manor.

Diego struggled to stand up without his cane in reach. As he found his balance, he gripped the torn right sleeve of his suit and ripped it fully off. He flexed his right hand, as a crack of lightning lit up the sky, reflecting against the smooth metal.

The prosthetic was hollow, similar to a skeletal structure. It looked unfinished by the way wires were exposed; dangling from his bicep. The hand was unnatural in the way the fingers curled into sharp claws. It was too dark outside to see properly, but the transition from metal to flesh on his shoulder looked extremely jagged and mutilated.

From the way he was leaning so heavily on his left leg, Chris could imagine his arm wasn't the only thing made of scrap pieces.

Diego turned to face him once more, his mask having fallen off at some point. The uneven scarring covered most of his face, with some of his hair missing in chunks around his hairline.

The reveal had distracted Chris long enough for Diego to pull some sort of EpiPen-looking device from his pocket and rip the cap off with his teeth. He slammed the syringe into his leg, letting out a pained yell as he did so.

With Diego nearly doubling over clutching his thigh, Chris leaped onto all fours, charging again. He pounced, claws aiming for the man's mangled neck with an animalistic snarl.

Before he could make contact, the metallic arm struck out at inhuman speeds, catching the coyote by the neck, holding him high into the air. The wind was knocked out of him, and Chris only gasped for air before Diego pivoted the momentum, slamming him into the ground.

The impact shook the ground and Chris desperately clawed at the metal wrist, barely scratching its surface.

Diego lifted him from the ground again as if he weighed nothing, and threw him with a visceral yell.

Chris felt himself tumble over a few tables before catching himself by dragging his claws along the dirt. His face snapped up in panic as Diego sprinted towards him, clawing at the ground for momentum.

The coyote was in full defensive mode as he just narrowly dodged a sweep of the metal claws. He barely had time to catch his breath as Diego was swinging again and again, pushing Chris further away from the courtyard as he barely escaped the blows.

With his flesh arm, Diego landed a swift punch to Chris' gut, having him stumble back a few feet in order to recover. The man in the gold suit was panting, but a deranged smile on his face held strong, illuminated occasionally by a flash of lightning. The first few drops of water had just fallen from the sky; the thick black clouds covering the moon only promised more.

"You wanted to take it outside, Gatito," Diego commented. "Why so glum?"

Chris was only partially aware of how wide his eyes were in fright, and his firm defensive stance with his claws outstretched and partially covering his face made him look more like prey than the gazelle mask did. He could barely hear Jimmy in his earpiece who was calling repeatedly for Martin and Aviva with no answer.

It didn't make sense. Just minutes ago Diego looked like he was one bad cough away from a funeral. Now he stood straight as a rod, with strength and speed he hadn't ever been capable of.

Chris couldn't even think of a witty response, he was too busy focusing on pulling air into his restricted lungs. By the way it burned on every inhale, he was almost positive something had been broken.

He couldn't beat him... not like this.

Chris thought back to his promise. The one he had made behind Martin's back.

"Leave my team alone... and I'll come with you," he bargains, desperation coating his voice. "You can have the suit, you can have me. Just please... let them go."

Diego doubles over in psychotic laughter, a kind Chris had never heard before. It was different from his normal smug chuckle; It was manic and disturbing. When Diego finally straightened his back, he was wiping tears away from his eyes.

Chris only took a few steps back in fear of the outburst, but his face was plastered with disbelief and confusion.

The rain had begun to fall more consistently, and a rolling thunder had drowned out the sound until it was too close to miss. The beating blades of a helicopter filled the air as it began to descend behind Diego, lighting up the ground they stood on with a blinding spotlight.

Diego began to approach him triumphantly, and it took everything in Chris' power not to run. His breathing became more erratic the closer he stalked but he forced himself to lower his claws in surrender.

He wouldn't be selfish this time. He wouldn't let anyone else get hurt.

Chris thought he would pass out when Diego's prosthetic hand wrapped around his collar in a tight hold.

Every instinct begged him to fight, to claw, to bite, to do *anything* but stand there and allow himself to be dragged away to that helicopter. To be put back in that suit. To be *used*.

"You know something, Christopher?..." Diego pulled him closer, leaning to whisper over his shoulder, directly into his ear. "It's not always about *you*."

Diego's hold tightened to a crushing vice, before shoving him violently backwards.

Past the flimsy rope fence, and into the open air of the cliffside.

Chris didn't even have the air to scream, his vision blacking out the second he hit the inky water with a loud crack.

Notes:

IM SO FUCKING INSANE RAHAHR R R R R A EBR RR R

im normal i promise im so normal

I love this chapter so much oh my GOODDD

There's going to be a lot of art about this on my tumblr btw.... i have like 3 drawings I'm almost done with that I'm going to be posting... so stay tuned for that!

Anyways thanks for reading, I'll see you guys next week!

Chapter 8 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/148816351>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_8_endnotes\)](#).)

Aviva thought nothing of the glamorous cheetah-masked woman until her back was completely turned towards her. Suddenly a deep sense of wrongness settled in her gut, causing her to nearly trip over her heels as her previous concentration was broken.

How had she even gotten in here? The doors had been locked.

Aviva only managed to take a few steps before Chris' panicked voice pierced her ear, "DIEGO'S NOT ALO-"

An instinct Aviva couldn't trace forced her to turn, just as the woman from before had pounced and was looming over her with a small blade clutched in both hands.

Aviva gasped, grabbing the cheetah's forearm before the impact could be made, and shoving her aside as she landed with a somersault. As she passed, the spotted woman had briefly made contact with the side of her head.

"Guys! I-" Aviva staggered back a few steps, hand flying towards her ear to warn the others, but her eyes widened when her fingers were met with nothing but the skin of her ear.

The woman perched on the floor in front of her, gracefully stood back up, revealing the small earpiece. "Come on now, Viva. That's cheating." She purred before crushing the small device between her fingers.

"Only my friends call me that. You're with Diego." Aviva concluded, holding her sharp claws out in a defensive position.

"*With* is a strong word," The cheetah twirling her blade. "More like tolerate." She charged again, swinging into open air as Aviva hastily ducked.

The caracal sprung back up, ripping her claws upwards for the cheetah's face, but the woman had flung her head back, missing by mere millimeters. The cheetah took advantage of their closeness, kicking her heel into Aviva's unprotected gut which sent her sprawling back into a decorative table against the wall.

The inventor grasped onto the expensive-looking ceramic that was perched on the table, turning around to smash it into the side of the head of the cheetah that rapidly approached her.

The shattering vase echoed, along with the cheetah's shout of surprise. Aviva took the small advantage to run at her, grabbing the petite woman by the wrist and twisting it behind her back, her blade dropping to the floor with a clatter.

"What does Diego want?" Aviva whispered dangerously into her ear.

"Funny you should ask," The cheetah giggled, surprising Aviva by dropping to the floor, and kicking her legs out from underneath her.

Aviva landed on her back for only a moment, before rocking into a kickup miraculously landing straight with her platform heels. Silently she was blessing her mother for forcing those gymnastics classes upon her.

"You're really cute," The cheetah praised, "I'd hate to mess up that pretty face."

Aviva was thrown off by the comment, unprepared for when the cheetah charged again, throwing punches that Aviva barely managed to block with her forearms. Despite her attacker being significantly thinner, her hidden strength was equally matched.

Distracted by her arms, Aviva failed to notice the way the Cheetah had leaned back until her leg shot up, kicking her directly in the chin as she cartwheeled backward. Aviva stumbled back into the wall with a grunt, unintentionally tearing off a curtain as she clutched it for support.

When the Cheetah ran at her, blade in hand once more, Aviva shot out with the curtain, managing to wrap it around the wrist that held the blade. She tugged hard, pulling the woman towards her, and ducked her shoulders to grab the spotted assailant by the waist before pushing upwards to throw her over her shoulder.

As the younger woman tumbled to the ground with a hiss, fighting the curtain that had tangled around her arm, Aviva lashed out with a powerful kick to the side of her head. As the cheetah lay flat on her back, Aviva pressed her heel into her free wrist, adding more pressure whenever she attempted to move.

Still, the cheetah just grinned at her out of breath. "What? You're not going to compliment me back? That's so rude."

Aviva growled in annoyance at her banter. "Start talking. What have you done with the suit?"

"Oh trust me, you'll find out..." Her legs shot upwards as she arched her core, bringing her feet up to either side of Aviva's face and pulling her forward into a tumble.

With them both sprawled on the floor, The cheetah had managed to wrap one of her legs around Aviva's neck, cutting off her flow of oxygen.

Aviva clawed viciously at the calf, her sharp nails digging into the flesh, but the hold did not break.

"Well, this was fun." The cheetah finally managed to rip the curtain from her arm, freeing her hands once more. She leaned over Aviva's face as she gasped soundlessly and her struggle weakened. "Hope we can still be friends, Viva."

Her smug grin was the last thing Aviva saw before the black spots consumed her vision.

Aviva wasn't even aware she had lost consciousness until muffled voices began flowing in and out of range as if she was being pulled in by the ocean's tide.

"Viva?" A warped voice called out to her.

"D'nt call me that." She muttered back on instinct, the venom barely present in her voice by the lack of energy she was able to put in it. "Only... 'm friends."

"Aviva, wake up." The voice called again, and this time it was blatantly clear. Like someone was talking directly into her ear. It was enough to jolt her awake with a gasp.

She inhaled rapidly, eyes darting around a dimmed room. She was immediately aware of the soreness of her neck and a spiking pain in her shoulders and arms. Looking up, she noticed her hands had been cuffed, suspended from the ceiling that dangled her weightlessly only a few inches off the ground.

Her breath hitched with panic until a presence to her left startled her, "Aviva! Are you alright?"

Her head swung so hard to the left, her whole body swayed slightly with the momentum. "Martin?" She questioned with a trembling voice.

He was hanging in the exact position as her, with his hands restrained above his head. Even with the lack of light, she could see he was still wearing his dress pants but was missing his jacket and cape as his light blue button-down was open, revealing his bare chest. His power suit had already been removed. "Where are we? What's going on?"

"I don't know..." Martin whispered disheartened. "I think I blacked out... someone... Diego had help." With renewed panic, he asked, "The others?! Did you-?"

"No," Aviva cut him short, saving him the breath. "I lost contact with them."

Before Martin could respond, several ceiling lights flicked on, flooding the room, and disorientating the two captives. The room appeared to be some sort of wine cellar. It was a room encased with concrete, a single door directly in front of them.

The metal door loudly creaked open, drawing the two's attention as a husky form limped into the room, the clacking of his cane echoing the mostly empty space. A tall, muscular woman followed behind him. Aviva had never seen her before, but from the way Martin tensed beside her, he may have a clue.

"I suppose it's too late to take up that offer of a dance?" He quipped; though it lacked humor as the woman merely glared at him.

They had all heard Diego's wheezing laughter from his conversation with Chris, but to get a glimpse of his mangled flesh and the way he gripped the cane as his lifeline made them both pause in shock. He was wearing his usual red button-down, but the mask usually plastered to his face was missing. Leaving his burning eyes and deep frown open for them to see. His right mechanical hand hung limply at his side, and his right foot seemed to drag, barely lifting off the ground with each step which echoed a metallic sound.

"I swear to God If you've done ANYTHING TO CHRIS-" Martin Bellowed, breaking the silence.

"Don't bother with the threats." The woman with the black flowing ponytail interrupted with a sneer. She was no longer in her striped dress, but rather a turtleneck tank top and a pair of wide-leg slacks, her heels clicked as she strode past the unnaturally silent Diego and stopped just short of Martin. Her previous flirtatious energy had disappeared and all that remained was a cold and calculated stare. "If it makes you shut up, he's useless to us."

"Us?" Aviva piped up, staring between Diego and the woman in front of Martin.

Diego's eyes drifted lazily to the inventor, where they seemed to get caught in a scheme. A malicious grin pulled at his lips, sending a spike of fear down Aviva's spine. His stare bore into her like a hungry predator.

And she couldn't help but question, *Is this what Chris had felt every time the suit had been disabled?*

"You can do whatever you want with me!" Martin barked, drawing Diego's attention away from her. "Just leave her alone!"

Diego's smile only widened, and in a grainy voice he said, "Just like your brother... so self-centered." With a few clacks of his cane, he was standing a few feet closer. "You're just as useless to me as he was."

When Diego's eyes turned devilishly towards Aviva once more, she felt her heart speed up in fear. She refused to let Diego's ego be fueled, so instead she hardened her glare, spitting out with as much confidence as Martin had previously, "So, are you gonna tell us what you want or are we just gonna hang here until you finally have an asthma attack?"

Martin sent her a pleading look, begging for her to be silent and let him keep their attention, but she ignored it, keeping her eyes trained on Diego.

The burly man's grin turned sour and he stalked closer to her. "I'm glad you're so eager to begin, Miss Corcovado."

"How many times do we have to kick your ass until you realize your mind control gimmick doesn't work out for you-" Martin called again, in a desperate attempt to win back Diego's attention, but instead was awarded a hefty punch to the gut by the woman in front of him, knocking the air out of his chest and silencing him.

"That was my greatest flaw..." Diego admitted through a wheezing breath, coughing roughly into his fist. "I'm done trying to control that power... I want to *own* the power." His flesh hand gently pulled a piece of stray hair from Aviva's face and tucked it behind her ear. "You're going to make me one of your power suits."

Aviva's facade was starting to crack as his hands hovered near her face. She was beyond terrified but refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it. Instead, she pulled her face away as far as her neck would allow and hissed, "I'm not taking commissions right now, but thanks for the offer."

"I figured you might say something like that," Diego whispered in her face, instead he flexed the previously limp prosthetic claw attached to his shoulder, and swiftly dug it into Martin's side.

Aviva let out a scream of surprise; simultaneously, Martin let out one in anguish. Martin quickly bit his tongue but was unable to suppress the pained grunt as Diego began to twist and flex the claws still embedded in his flesh, quickly painting the light blue shirt a deep red.

"STOP!" Aviva cried, kicking her feet to try and get some momentum as if that would break the bonds that held her. "DON'T HURT HIM!"

Diego immediately sheathed his claws, with a grunt, his eyes never leaving Aviva's. "Do you understand the arrangement now?" He asked, hovering his claws over Martin. "Either I get my power suit, or you get a gutted Kratt."

"Aviva... don't..." Martin whispered, out of breath, and struggling against the pained grunts that were threatening to escape him. "I'll be okay."

And finally, Aviva's mask completely broke as she met Martin's expression. Tears filled her eyes unwillingly as her mouth opened with no sound escaping.

The power suits were never meant to be a weapon.

They were a *tool*. A way to help better understand the world around them in order to help preserve beautiful and unique creatures. She could never agree to be a part of their descent to violence and misuse. With her technology, Diego could remain unstoppable.

But if she didn't...

She could already hear the rhythmic pattern of blood dripping to the floor. The truth is, she was scared... and she wasn't willing to gamble her friend's life for anything.

"Okay..." She shakily agreed, regret and guilt immediately consuming her at the smug look in Diego's eyes.

He pulled her wrists upwards, unhooking her from the ceiling and her bare feet dropped to the frigid ground in surprise. Before she could even get her footing, the woman with the ponytail, unclasped the chain, hefted her up, and dragged her away from Martin, closer to the door; she tripped over her purple gown the entire way.

"Ramona will provide you with anything you need," Diego gestured to the taller woman as he followed. "And will also be checking over your work to ensure you don't try anything."

He began limping towards her, crudely wiping the blood from his claws onto his black pants. Aviva stepped back until the chain pulled taught from where Ramona held it tight. Diego's claw shakily clasped her chin, holding her gaze firm in his direction. With his proximity, she noticed how his jaw looked slightly crooked as if it had been snapped out of place and put back wrong, and she found herself unable to tear her gaze away from the clouded pupil in his right eye. Through her terror, Aviva was able to note how his brief exertion had seemed to leave him exhausted.

"I expect your finest work, Miss Corcovado." He squeezed his claws slightly, putting a sharp pressure on her skin but not enough to break the surface. "If I don't get my suit in three days, consider the blonde and every other waste of breath on that turtle ship dead."

"3 Days?!" She gasped in surprise. "It takes months- *years* to develop the correct-" She was cut off by the pair of claws squeezing her jaw shut and Diego's frown of disapproval.

"Then for his sake..." Diego nodded his head back at Martin who was struggling against his cuffs in vain. "Let's hope you work quickly." He pushed her to the floor before stepping over her on his way to the door. Ramona took a moment to pull Aviva up by the elbows and followed behind him without a word.

Martin pleaded with them to leave her alone, raising his voice with each attempt as they continuously ignored him.

When the metal door shut, it reverberated through the room, leaving only Martin's short anxious breaths and the slow rhythmic dripping of his blood.

It was dark and cold. A cloud of numbness had fallen over his body, and Chris was unaware of his own existence.

And then like a flick of a lighter, his lungs erupted into burning agony, spreading across his chest like a web and forcing a substance up his throat.

He was barely able to feel the hands gripping him, or the grainy sand clinging to his drenched skin and hair as he vomited up the acidic liquids.

Through his own gasps for air, he could hear coughing directly beside him and Chris managed to peel his salt-encrusted eyes open enough to see a mop of soaked red hair hunched over, clutching handfuls of sand.

"Chris? Chris, can you hear me?" A muffled voice broke through the ringing in his ears, and Chris struggled to shift his gaze again, upwards at a blurred face, the outline of her tightly curled hair illuminated by the moon behind it.

He knew who she was, but through the fire in his chest and the cloud in his head, he couldn't quite place a name to her. His eyes were heavy and his body felt like a rock; he was too weak to support it. He knew that the hands that cradled his chest were safe, and he could sink into them without consequence.

Koki's heart clenched again with worry as Chris relaxed limp into her arms, but his steadily rising chest refrained her from starting CPR once more.

"JZ, you alright?" She breathed out to the ginger still catching his breath next to her.

He nodded, unable to verbalize a response yet. Despite the shivering in his soaked suit and waterlogged shoes, he seemed alright.

The rain fell steadily, soaking her own hair as well as the trio caught their breath on the shore.

Koki had been beyond shocked when she ran down the slope to the beach of the property to see Jimmy, of all people, dragging an unconscious Chris onto the shore. She had been lost in the chaos, trying to reconnect with anyone from her team. As the communication specialist, she almost blamed her craftsmanship on the lack of response from the comms, when Jimmy called to her in a panic that Chris had "gone under" and he was "going in after him."

Jimmy, having only recently learned to swim, jumping into a rough ocean in the middle of the night, wasn't exactly the epitome of safe and well-informed decision making. And considering he was nearly coughing up the same amount of water as Chris, just barely worked out.

The scolding died on Koki's tongue, as she realized both her friends were still alive, something that should not be on the list of things she doubted often. Instead, her focus was turned to the two still missing from her sight.

"Aviva?" She asked Jimmy, not even bothering with the comm still in her ear, knowing she wouldn't get a response.

"Gone," He breathed deeply, sucking in the frigid air. "Martin?" He questioned back, looking up with desperate hope.

“Disappeared,” She responded, painfully watching his expression break.

Jimmy hung his head again, his hair hiding his face like a curtain. “What the hell just happened?...” His voice broke with emotion.

“I think we just gave Diego exactly what he wanted.”

Notes:

Oh, how the tides have turned...

I'm sure this is totally fine and will have zero repercussions at all!!!!

I'll see you guys next Saturday, thanks so much for reading!! <3

Chapter 9 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/149291023>)

Notes:

Heyo! Just a warning there is another reference/implication of self-harm in this chapter! It does not take place in writing but it is implied to happen. If this is something you're uncomfortable with, I suggest skipping the end of this chapter! Thanks, take care of yourself <3

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_9_endnotes\)](#).)

Aviva had only gotten a glimpse of whatever building they had been brought to before Ramona pulled her through another door and into what appeared to be a makeshift workstation.

The desk had been littered with obsolete versions of tools she would use herself; none of them strong or sharp enough to cut through chains. Zach's prototype was on one of the tables, already dismantled beyond recognition.

Zach was right, it would take a miracle to get it running again.

What concerned her most, was the blue vest right next to it... already in the process of being stripped for parts. It looked like someone had been dissecting it; trying to study how it operated.

There weren't many words exchanged between the two, and even more dread settled in Aviva's stomach as she realized Ramona wouldn't be leaving her alone to work.

“Martin needs medical attention.” Aviva turned towards the taller woman, refusing to even go near the workbench. “Get him some antibacterial spray and clean bandages and then I'll get started.”

Ramona scoffed, hooking the short chain to a metal clip on the table. “How about you make some progress and I'll think about it.”

“If he bleeds out, you lose your leverage,” The inventor rebutted. “He lives, or no creature power suit.”

The glare Ramona sends back is sharp enough to cut diamonds. After a moment she seems to cave. “I'll send some back with you if you get to work.”

Understanding that's as much of a deal as Aviva can bargain, she accepts and turns towards the work table.

At first, Ramona's presence had been like an annoying fly looming over her shoulder, but to Aviva's surprise, she soon dove into the work from across the table, occasionally pointing out parts she didn't recognize.

The inventor watched with calculated eyes as Ramona carefully soldered a small circuit board that had been previously ripped from Martin's suit.

Aviva knew an engineer when she saw one.

Unfortunately, that was just making her current task more difficult.

One of the major updates to the suits had been a tracking beacon. Anytime the suit was activated it would send a signal directly to the Tortuga. She could potentially manually activate the beacon, but not without Ramona recognizing it. Considering the blueprints she seemed to be working off of were also stolen from Zach and therefore outdated, the feature would be hidden as long as Aviva didn't draw attention to it.

The remote disabling mechanism was another feature she was hoping to install, but with their expectation of trickery, she had to find an opening to sabotage the suit.

With Martin on the line, she couldn't afford to be caught.

They fell into a silent rhythm, stripping parts from both suits and reutilizing them onto a larger combat vest.

“You've redirected the power source to prevent surges, and have them stored for future activations... brilliant.”

Ramona breathed with wonder as she examined a piece of the suit.

She had been carefully dissecting some of the upgraded additions and admiring them like a child. However, each compliment made Aviva more uneasy.

Ramona was difficult to read. She was cold, yet not temperamental. She seemed to want nothing to do with Aviva, yet would occasionally ask questions about her process.

She was polite when she spoke, which threw Aviva off to no end. It was extremely confusing when your captor used please and thank you when she asked to be passed tools from across the table.

Finally, Aviva dared to address her, "I don't understand why you're doing this."

Ramona flicked her eyes up at Aviva in annoyance as she continued to pick apart the power cell to put into the new vest, "Diego already monologued his plan to you, I'm not sure what else you need."

"No, I mean..." Aviva swallowed, praying her observations had been at least a little accurate. "You're a scientist. Aren't you? You've already put half the suit together without me. Why are you working for Diego?"

"I don't work *for* anybody," Ramona corrected. "I don't need you to understand; I just need you to finish the suit."

Aviva latched onto Ramona's willingness to even entertain a conversation with her. Diego may be heartless, but engineer to engineer... she may be able to find some humanity within Ramona.

"Diego's prosthetics. You made those?" Aviva asked, hoping to grow whatever attachment they seemed to have. Aviva had talked enough about her work, it was time for her to learn some of Ramona's.

"I would hardly consider it my best work; the asshole was too impatient to let me finish them." Ramona's lip curled into a sneer for a moment, "but, yes."

Again, Aviva's brow furrowed in confusion. Every mention of Diego seemed to have Ramona disgusted, yet she was personally overseeing the creation of his suit, and strangely invested in his health.

Deciding to capitalize on that investment, Aviva looked over the suit as she removed the DNA module. "Assuming you've done your homework, you should know how dangerous it is for the suit to be activated by a foreign user. Martin's took me two years to program; Chris' 18 months."

By the way Ramona didn't look up from her work, it was confirmed she didn't have a solution for the DNA sequencing. At least, not one she was very confident in.

"Three days isn't enough time." Aviva hardened her tone, "A half-cooked creature power suit could kill Diego if he tries to use it. And judging by his arm... I don't think he's willing to wait."

She had honestly been counting on Diego's impatience, though there was no doubt in her mind that Diego planned on disposing of her and Martin both the second he deemed the suit "finished" Whether it was actually ready or not. Her and Martin's lives were on a timer.

She knew it was impossible to deliver a proper suit within that time, so all she could do was stall to hopefully give the rest of their team some time to find them; assuming they had made it out of that party in one piece.

Something in Ramona snapped and she shot out of her chair suddenly, scaring Aviva into taking a few steps back. "He wouldn't need that arm nor this suit if you hadn't attempted to take his life in the first place." She immediately calmed herself, realizing she had let the comment get to her. After a breath, her expression returned to cold and calculated. "I told you; you don't need to understand. You just need to fix the fucking suit."

Ramona settled back onto her stool, wordlessly continuing her work. Aviva cautiously approached the table. Pushing Ramona further would only dismantle the small bridge they had made, so instead, Aviva silently continued, hoping the seed of doubt would be enough to flourish into something more.

It was one of those times Chris felt like he was a floating consciousness in a body he had no control over; just barely aware of his surroundings and words around him only seemed to even register as a language a solid minute after they were even spoken.

But still, he found himself slowly coming back to awareness. It was as if his subconsciousness found the strength to surface above the inky darkness of the suit, but it never lasted long. Soon he would grow too weak again to fight against the suit that constantly pulled him down and he would be back in the prison of numbness.

"It's not my fault you already fired your mechanic. I'm not some lackey you can summon to fix your broken toys."

He slowly picked up on a new voice, one he didn't recognize. The words hit him slowly like molasses, just barely sinking into him, staying congested just out of reach from his comprehension.

"When you told me you had a big score for us, I didn't think you switched to human trafficking." Something about the voice felt wrong, it had a magnetic ring to it, as if she weren't actually in the room. "I'm not interested in a career change,

Diego.”

“Trafficking would involve passing him to someone else,” Diego grumbled in an annoyed tone. “Besides, he's practically an animal most of the time.”

“People don't cross borders for animals,” the woman hissed. “You stole experimental technology and the friend of the scientist who created it. You can't just fly to another country, change your name, and expect this to blow over. You're putting our entire livelihood in jeopardy.”

When Diego growled in anger, Chris desperately wanted to step away but was sorely reminded of his lack of control. His feet stayed planted and his shoulders square at attention. His vision cleared just enough to make out a broad-shouldered woman on the large screen of Zach's ship. Her face looked blurry to him, but the intelligence and power she radiated were what he noticed most.

“I didn't realize you had morals now, Ramona,” Diego spat. “Your hands are no cleaner than mine; you'd do well to remember that.”

Ramona seemed to ignore him. “You're gambling with power that you can't control. I won't let Carmen get involved in this; you'll take us all down with you.”

“I'm about to settle one of the biggest deals of our lives,” Diego's accent was thicker than normal as he conversed with her, “When you get off your high horse and are ready to honor our arrangement, come find me.”

The voice gave a disappointed sigh. “Don't get yourself killed, hermano.”

Waking back up in his own bed was a disorientating experience for Chris.

At first, he blamed his fuzzy head and general anxious feeling on a bad dream that he couldn't quite remember, but when he tried to sit up and a spike of pain jolted through his chest, he realized it wasn't a nightmare.

It was worse.

Throwing the bedding off of himself, Chris gripped his clean t-shirt as his lungs flared with agony. Grunting through the pain, he scrambled out of bed, noticing the sun was well into the sky from the window.

“MARTIN?!” He yelled as he flew open the door and waddled down the eerily silent hallway, pulling in short breaths as he did so. “AVIVA?!”

He stopped at Jimmy's room, it being the closest, barging in without knocking. “JIMMY?!” The panic in his voice rose with every call as his eyes darted around the empty room.

He prayed that it was just a bad dream; a fabrication of his mind. He begged for someone to run down the hallway and scold him for being so loud. Anything but the complete silence that he was met with.

“KOKI?!” His chest was on fire as he bellowed, cupping his hands around his mouth for the sound to travel further. The motion-activated lights turned on when he entered the main hub, suggesting no one had been in there for a good while, a rare occurrence on the *Tortuga*. “**ANYONE?!**” His voice cracked at the last call as he began to circle around the room.

A hand found its way to his hair where he unconsciously began to tug until his scalp burned as hot as his lungs. It felt like a belt was tied around his ribcage, and any deep inhale sent a paralyzing jolt across it.

His mind raced with the possibilities, fingernails clawing down onto his face, leaving red angry lines.

Diego had them.

They were all gone.

Martin was gone.

Everyone was *gone*. Gone. Gone. Gone. **Gone**.

And it was all his fault.

“Chris!” a familiar voice called from across the room. And suddenly there were hands, pulling his own off his face, allowing his eyes to meet with a pair of deep brown. He immediately noticed the bandage taped across the bridge of her nose, but otherwise, she looked okay.

Still not able to breathe, Chris could only stare in shock as another form came into view, Jimmy with the M.I.T. strapped to his back. “I told you, we should've taken him to a hospital.”

Koki shot him a glare, before turning her gentle expression back to Chris, coaxing him into pulling his arms above his head. “Just breathe, Chris. You're okay.”

At the sight of his team, Chris let out a shaky sigh of relief. Another mental trick... a far more disturbing one than usual. As such he was struggling to reverse from the shaken panic he had been slowly descending into.

“S-sorry,” Chris managed to stutter out as he breathed as deeply as his lungs would allow. “I...” He felt his face heat in embarrassment. They were no stranger to his episodes of panic, though rarely did they ever have to help him out of it. At most, they would offer comfort until Martin arrived. Martin always knew what to do. “I need Martin.” Usually, someone would have already run to grab him by now.

Koki and Jimmy shared a small look, one of pain that had Chris' progress immediately crumbling.

“Where’s Martin?” Chris gasped, stomach dropping once more. His mind was spinning from the amount of relief and devastation he had been flipping back and forth from. Though this time, it felt more solid; more real. “Aviva?!”

Koki pondered her answer for a moment, keeping a loose grip on Chris’ arms in fear of how badly his legs seemed to be shaking. Unwilling to lie, she settled with “We’re working on that,” which only seemed to send Chris into a worse spiral.

There was a reason someone always went to get Martin.

“No no no no no…” Chris’ hand flew back down to grip his chest as a particularly bad throb coursed through him, leaving him gasping in pain.

A few panicked calls from Koki that Chris could barely hear later, and then there was another pair of hands guiding him into a seat as Chris was already halfway down to the floor.

Diego had them. And God did Chris know what Diego was capable of…

None of this would have happened if he just threw that shard into the river. None of this would have happened if they had just let Diego have him. The Reprogrammed suit would have torn up his body enough at some point and his friends and brother would still be safe.

Instead, it shredded his mind and led to the people he loved most in the hands of the monster who did it.

“CK, I need you to listen to me.” Jimmy planted his hands on Chris’ shoulders, forcing his attention. He spoke with a sense of urgency Chris had never heard from the laid-back pilot, almost shocking him out of his panic immediately. “We’re gonna fix this. We’re gonna find Diego and get our friends back. But we *need* you. Martin and Aviva *need* you.”

And Jimmy was right. He could panic and scream and cry and wither away alone in a hole as he so desperately wanted to at this moment, but that wouldn’t save his friends.

Martin didn’t stop when Chris had been taken. Not for a second.

Chris could curse Diego. He could blame himself. He could overanalyze every single decision he’s ever made that led to this future.

Or he could go save his fucking friends.

Because it didn’t matter anymore who threw the first stone. It didn’t matter if Chris was losing a battle of morality. It didn’t matter if his friends viewed him differently. It didn’t matter if he would be able to look at himself in the mirror afterward.

Martin and Aviva needed him.

Chris forced himself to take a breath, and then another, pushing past the burning pain. He locked eyes with Jimmy and gave a shaky nod. Relief instantly flooded both Koki and Jimmy’s expressions and the pilot gave him a small smile.

“Take a minute, do whatever you need to do.” Jimmy squeezed his shoulder once before letting go. “Koki and I found some evidence at the manor we need to analyze. Whenever you’re ready, Chris.”

Koki nodded with a sympathetic smile, following Jimmy over to the main console to unpack the M.I.T. with whatever they had found.

Chris dipped into the adjacent room which happened to be the medbay, the sliding door automatically closing behind him. He pushed his back against the cold metal doors, reaching out to activate the lock on the side.

He let out a few more shaky breaths, ear ringing in the silence of the empty room. His head was spinning with too many emotions to properly recognize. Fear was a main contender. He was petrified of what Diego was capable of. Not to mention a pissed-off drugged-up Diego. He was scared for his friends, who were continuously trapped in these situations because of him.

They were all researchers. None of them signed up to deal with kidnappings and life-threatening hostage situations. None of them were equipped to deal with it.

Except Chris.

Because whether he did it willingly or not… he had been a part of that world once. Whether he controlled his hands or not, they were still responsible for taking the lives of others. He didn’t have to like it, but the truth was, it was a part of him now. Despite how hard his subconscious tried, he’ll never be able to truly forget.

Diego, while being the source of his pain, simultaneously gave him the tools he needed to defend himself.

In more ways than one…

Chris’ hand roamed to his right bicep.

He silently roamed over to the counter and pulled open one of the drawers as slowly as he could to avoid rattling the objects inside of it.

He stared at his reflection in the perfectly polished scalpel as he drew it into the open air. Chris’ eyes flicked to the door once more to check it was locked.

They need you.

Notes:

POV: Chris decides to lock-in

Funny story! I cracked a rib about 10 months ago, and they actually don't wrap your chest anymore for that. It restricts breathing, and when you have a broken rib it's really important to take deep breaths to limit the chance of pneumonia (Which ironically I ALSO got about 3 months ago for unrelated reasons AKHSDAJ)

Which is why I didn't acknowledge Chris having any sort of bandages or anything. MEDICAL ACCURACCYYY LETS GOOO

Some of you may have noticed I keep changing the number of chapters I expect this to have.... because I'm still debating on how I want to split it up... but we are coming close to the finish line... which is a little sad but I'm so excited to share the rest of this fic with you! Things pick up pretty quickly next chapter, so enjoy the "peace" while it lasts. Thanks for reading! I'll see you all next week <3

Chapter 10 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/149763349>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_10_endnotes\)](#).)

Aviva couldn't be certain how long it had been, but she assumed they had worked well into the next day. She was used to brutal hours of inventing. still, the adrenaline from her situation began to wear off, leaving her muscles aching and her eyesight blurry.

She hadn't spoken to Ramona since her outburst but the negative energy had long since dissipated, leaving them to fall into a routine. It wasn't hard to notice how their progress began to slow. Ramona, starting to work just as sluggishly as Aviva.

With her weakened focus, Aviva decided to take that opportunity to transfer some of the safety mechanisms from Martin's suit into Diego's. Fighting against her exhaustion, Aviva took care to move slowly, shielding the remote deactivation behind another circuit board as she installed it.

She was only able to partially connect it before Ramona, tossing her tool back onto the bench with a loud clatter, had Aviva nearly jumping out of her skin.

Whipping around with a sharp inhale, she assumed she had been caught but was surprised to see the woman with a high ponytail rubbing a hand down her face.

When Ramona unhooked her chain from the table and motioned towards the door, Aviva didn't dare ask why, grateful to be able to step away. She continued to stumble over her dress which was just a little too long without her heels to give her some height as she was led down the short path back to the wine cellar. There was a single window on their path, and by the blinding light peaking through the curtains, Aviva was right in her assumptions of time.

Ramona stopped at a cabinet before they descended the stairs, pulling out what appeared to be a stack of cloth napkins.

"I asked for antibacterial spray and bandages," Aviva furrowed her brows in frustration at the cloth that was handed to her.

"Does this look like a hospital to you?" Ramona side-eyed her as she unlocked the cellar door before leading her down the stairs. "Use it, or don't. I don't care." Her exhaustion, just as intense as Aviva's, was evident in the harsh way she spoke.

When the metal door to the wine cellar creaked open, Martin's head shot up and met Aviva's with a mix of relief and also pain.

"Martin!" Aviva gasped out, immediately noticing his pale skin that was shiny from sweat.

"Aviva!" Martin grunted out, clearly uncomfortable from the way he had been hanging for hours. His shoulders were killing him and his fingers had gone numb. "Are you hurt? Are you okay?"

"No, no. I'm okay!"

Ramona, ignoring their reunion, marched Aviva to the center of the room, attaching the chain back to the hook on the short ceiling, but too lazy to try and hang her cuffs back up there as well. Instead, Aviva would have a short range to wander the room, but Ramona considered it harmless enough and stalked back to the door. "I'll be back in half an hour." She grumbled before slamming the door, surely off to find some rest.

Aviva couldn't afford to do the same.

As soon as the metal door shut with an echo, she sprung to work, standing as tall as she could to try and reach Martin's cuffs. With a little help from Martin, he was able to use her knee as a stepping stool and unhook himself.

However, as soon as the ceiling lost its grip on him, he fell immediately, knocking Aviva down with him.

The cuffs were still attached via a chain, but he would at least be more comfortable on the floor with her.

"Sorry..." Martin panted from the small exertion. Grunting as she helped him roll off of her.

Aviva dismissed his unneeded apology, worry taking hold of her as she finally got a good look at him. She could tell he was feverish just by their close proximity, the heat radiating from his skin in waves. "Oh, Martin..." she whispered, gently peeling the blood-encrusted shirt that had stuck to his wound.

He hissed as she did so, gripping at the floor to stop himself from moving too much.

Aviva stopped herself from gasping when she finally saw the swollen puncture wound that was turning a bright red, not wanting to alarm her friend too much. It was definitely infected. The soaked shirt had crusted against the wound, stopping the blood flow. When she peeled it away, parts of the wound began to bubble again.

It was slightly above and to the left of another set of scars that Aviva had recently treated; closer to his ribs. She hadn't seen the raised lines that followed the curve of his skin all the way down to his belt line since she removed the stitches. He'd done well to keep them hidden in recent months.

She silently cursed. If she had only convinced Ramona to let her treat him immediately...

"That bad?" Martin tried to joke, but it didn't sound as funny as he had hoped.

"Try not to move. You need more than fucking napkins," Aviva's eyes searched the room, catching on a long skinny glass bottle of clear liquid on the wine shelf.

The shelf was against the wall of the door, just out of reach, the chain pulling against one of her hands while the other stretched as far as she could. She did another examination of the room, her eyes roaming over anything that could be useful. Finally, her eyes landed on Martin, who was concerningly uninterested in whatever she had been doing.

"Sorry, I need to borrow these," She wrestled off Martin's shoes and socks, stuffing both socks into the heel of one shoe, holding the other in her hand.

Walking as close as she could to the shelf, she tossed the shoe with the socks with careful calculations up next to the wine shelf. She then took half a step back to give herself some room to move, taking aim with the other shoe.

Taking a deep breath, she threw the leather shoe, hitting the glass bottle, and knocking it off the shelf right into the cushioned shoe on the floor, absorbing the impact before rolling onto the concrete floor towards her.

An accomplished smile spread on her face as she easily picked up the bottle and turned back towards Martin, who looked like he was starting to drift off.

Not bothering with attempting to wake him herself, she merely popped open the bottle, giving the vodka a quick sniff to make sure it was what she assumed it to be. "This is gonna sting a little bit..." She warned even though she was almost certain he wasn't currently listening to her.

The second she generously poured the alcohol onto the wound, Martin sat up with a pained cry, "OH FUCK!"

One of Aviva's hands flew to his chest, gently easing him back onto the floor, while the other continued to clean the wound with the liquid. Martin hissed, keeping himself as still as possible, but very much awake now.

"You wouldn't mind giving me a shot of that as well?" Martin tried to tease again, but his voice cracked as tears gathered in his eyes from the searing burn on the side of his torso. "Maybe two?"

"Sorry, all gone," She waved the empty bottle at him before setting it aside and pressing the napkins against him.

They fell into silence as Aviva began tearing off long strips from the bottom of her gown to tie the cloth napkins into place as Martin stared at the dark ceiling, taking deep shuddering breaths.

As the inventor was tying off her work, satisfied with the amount of pressure being applied, a hand settled on her forearm, drawing her attention.

"Are you okay? Like... really okay?" Martin had dropped his lighthearted tone, staring at her with sincere eyes.

"I'm better off than you are at the moment," Aviva paused, knowing what he was really asking. "They just took me to another room; had me work on the suit for a while. They didn't hurt me." She placed a hand on top of his burning one.

"Viva, you can't do it," he pleaded. "Once he has that suit, he's going to go back for the others."

Aviva broke their eye contact; her heart clenching at the thought of her other friends. "I know..."

Martin opened his mouth to continue, but the metal door swinging open with a creak snapped both of their attention.

They both tensed, expecting Diego or Ramona, but were dumbfounded when instead it was a shorter younger woman, with extremely short hair.

Aviva immediately recognized her as the cheetah-clad woman responsible for her capture. Though she looked far less dangerous in a pair of worn-out sneakers and a leather jacket, mid-bite into the sandwich in her hand.

It was quiet for a moment while she kicked the door closed with her foot, Martin and Aviva sharing a quick confused glance.

"You guys like PB and J?" She asked as casually as one could, holding up a clear baggy of sandwiches.

"Same height... same silhouette," Koki examined two images of footage next to each other on her screen. "Definitely Zach's thief."

On the screen was a slightly blurred image of a dark-skinned woman in a cheetah-themed dress, and right next to it was the security log she had spent hours analyzing before.

Jimmy was sitting next to her, flipping through all the photos they managed to retrieve from the press. "If we're sticking with the cat-themed guest, that leaves about... sixty more suspects?"

Koki let out a huff of frustration. Turning her attention back to the other evidence. Usually, Aviva would be running a chemical analysis on the strange syringe Jimmy had picked up while Koki was able to focus solely on doing research. Trying to run both at once was starting to give her a headache. Yet, she still pushed her hover chair over to the computer running the diagnostic to check on it.

"Whatever was in here is some funky stuff," She skimmed over the list of chemicals that the computer had recognized. Koki had never heard of most of the substances but was almost certain they concocted some sort of steroid drug.

"I'm not surprised. Diego was tweaked out," Jimmy answered, scrolling through more photos. The computer was automatically running facial recognition on the photos, though it was a slow process considering the masks obscuring the guests' faces. Whenever the system couldn't find a match, he would swipe the photo onto their digital evidence board. "Any signal from Martin's CPS?"

Koki quickly rolled over to another screen. "Nothing... Suit hasn't been activated since before the party. Either Diego's found a way to mask the signal, or he hasn't managed to break through Aviva's firewalls yet." She typed in a few more commands before sliding back over to the main computer. "I'm honestly not sure if I should be grateful or not."

Jimmy pondered her question for a moment, he had been nervously tapping his foot on the floor for a while. They both knew Diego's choices were calculated. Aviva and Martin had been targeted for a reason. They had several running theories, but most of them concluded with Martin's suit being reprogrammed in some sense. And if Diego had managed to get the suit activated, it meant he found a way to force Aviva into doing it.

Why Diego didn't just grab Chris when he had the chance? Jimmy would never know. He saw the end of their exchange, too fearful to leave Chris alone even if he was ordered to run. He saw how Chris froze; how he tried to offer himself as a sacrifice.

He also saw how Diego rejected him.

He was certain it went deeper than Diego looking down on Chris as weak. If Jimmy had to bet on anything, he would theorize it had more to do with the fact that Martin had been largely responsible for thwarting Diego the first time.

It was an unspoken understanding between the two crew members that Diego activating the suit would be their best chance of finding their friends.

"I'd never wish that on anybody... but how else are we going to find out where they are?" Jimmy solemnly whispered, clutching the tablet harder.

"With this," Chris drew their attention while tossing a petri dish onto the circular console in the center of the room.

Before she turned, Koki let out a breath of relief. It had been a while since Chris disappeared, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could ignore it. However, when her eyes caught onto a thick bandage wrapped around his bicep, and the pale look of his skin, a hand flew up to her mouth in startle.

"Chris!" Jimmy jumped up, rushing to his side, hovering but not quite touching him. His eyes were locked on the bandage that had blood starting to speckle through and the petri dish with a microchip sitting inside. "What did you *do*?" He whispered in disbelief.

Ignoring their concern, Chris continued, "We'll get it back online; track the signal." Koki and Jimmy continued to stare at the arm that hung motionless at his side. "Attach it to a flybot and send it as a decoy. That'll give us a distraction." With his left arm, Chris added a flybot icon to their growing evidence board. "We can sneak in wherever he's hiding out, grab Martin and Aviva, and get out of there."

The evidence of his earlier panic had been fully erased. Instead, he stood tall, with a determined expression. Maybe it was because they were related, but at that moment he looked more like Martin than himself.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Koki managed to close her jaw with a click. Was it extremely disturbing that Chris had just dug a microchip out of his own flesh? Most certainly. Did they have the time or resources to confront that right now? Not really.

Even if his confidence was a ruse, Koki decided he seemed alright for now. The unknown state of their other two friends took priority. They didn't have a second to spare.

"Alright," she agreed, Jimmy shooting her a look of disbelief that she was going along with it. "I'll get started."

Swiping the dish containing the microchip, she marched over to her computer to start rebooting the microchip Aviva had previously disabled.

"Jimmy, warm up the engines," Chris turned towards the pilot. "We need to be ready the second we have a direction."

It took Jimmy a moment to barely nod, before nodding again with more confidence, still not fully comfortable with what just transpired but also not willing to confront it just yet. That was a task he was happy to leave for Martin whenever they got him back.

Before exiting down the hall that led to the cockpit, he took one last glance at Chris who was studying their evidence board, weaving out suspects with a criteria Jimmy did not understand.

He'd changed a lot in the past half year... Jimmy knew he had every reason to. Chris was harder to predict; a little quieter, and a lot more skittish. His current confident and organized persona was the closest thing to pre-Diego Chris that Jimmy had seen in a long time, and still, it felt a little off.

They'd all been pushed past their limits, just in the last 12 hours alone. But Chris had been shoved closer and closer to an edge for a long time now, and somehow still hadn't lost his footing; even if there were brief moments where everyone assumed he did. In a way, Jimmy admired it. In many other ways, it scared him.

Jimmy wasn't lying when he said they needed him. Sure, Koki had a power suit, but she wasn't as skilled and experienced as Chris was. There was a reason the brothers led the pack on every adventure.

He knew his friend was strong, Chris proved it time and time again. But everyone had their limitations.

Jimmy had to trust that this wouldn't be Chris'.

The woman with the short hair had sat cross-legged on the floor across from them. She didn't seem to be cautious of them but still sat just out of reach of their chains.

When she tossed over the bag of sandwiches Aviva couldn't help the suspicious glare. "Are you trying to poison us?"

"Yes," The girl took another bite of her sandwich, sarcasm blatant in her tone. "We went through the trouble of kidnapping you, just so we could poison you with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Aviva eyed her cautiously, but couldn't deny she was starving. Martin needed all the strength he could get to fight off that infection. So, she took a bite of the first sandwich, to ensure its authenticity, before handing it off to Martin who was still shaking a little from the aggravation to his wound.

"You wouldn't happen to have any Tylenol, would you?" Aviva asked, cramming half the sandwich in her mouth. She figured she might as well ask since they were being generous.

"Does Diego look like the kind of guy who pops a Tylenol when he's not feeling well?"

"Touché."

They fell into a strangely *normal* conversation. The woman complimented Aviva on how her eyeliner was holding up, asking for brand suggestions. Aviva responded conversationally, figuring it couldn't hurt to accept the company. Martin was staying uncharacteristically silent, picking at the sandwich and vaguely nodding every so often as if he were paying attention. By the way he almost dozed off a few times, the inventor could tell he was not. At some point, she adjusted herself so his head was resting on her lap and she used some of the extra napkins to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

None of the information the dark-skinned woman had shared was necessarily helpful to their situation like her conversation with Ramona had been. She didn't discuss Diego, or her involvement with him.

Aviva was having a hard time understanding her situation. The young woman seemed carefree and independent. She was almost disconnected from the whole ordeal, like someone you'd meet up with for coffee and catch up on life. If it weren't for the fact Aviva had experienced her deadly skills up close, she would seem like a normal law-abiding citizen.

The only unnerving part was the way she dismissed the fact that she was talking to two people who were kidnapped, one of which had been bleeding out on the floor, like it was an average day of her life.

Just like Ramona, it confused Aviva but in a whole different way.

And around what Aviva assumed to be half an hour, the door creaked open once again, drawing all of their attention and stirring Martin who had finally dozed off.

The semi-normal kidnapper in front of them froze like a deer in headlights as Ramona, who somehow was looking more exhausted than when she left, spotted her.

“Carmen?!” Ramona scolded, “What the hell did I say about coming down here?!”

“I was bored!” Carmen gave an unimpressed eye roll. “We have people chained in our basement and I’m not allowed to come say hi?”

“Do you have any idea how pissed Diego would be if he knew you were down here?!” Ramona stormed over, pulling Carmen up by her elbow as if she were an ornery teenager. “I’ve already had to deal with one of his tantrums today, I do not have it in me to handle another one.”

Aviva and Martin watched the interaction with wide eyes. And if it hadn’t already clicked, the way Carmen stuck her tongue out before closing the door behind her as she left solidified both of their thoughts. They both made knowing eye contact, confirming they were on the same page. Martin, because he had experienced it first-hand, and Aviva because she watched similar interactions on a daily basis.

Aviva was already standing on her feet, when Martin grabbed her hand, halting her. His face was contorted with anger in Ramona’s direction. He struggled to his feet, despite Aviva’s complaints, and planted himself in front of her, shielding her from Ramona.

The broad-shouldered woman remained unimpressed. She looked at him with an anger that only seemed to show itself when Martin was in her field of view.

Ramona had yet to hurt her, but Aviva couldn’t be certain about her restraint towards Martin. Before she could diffuse the situation, Martin blurted out, “You clearly hate it here. Why are you helping him.”

Ramona didn’t answer, so Martin pushed further. “And why are you involving your sister in it?”

That seemed to spark a reaction. Before anyone could blink, Ramona had him pressed against the wall with her elbow against his throat.

“Martin!” Aviva cried out, stepping to his rescue but he held out a hand halting her.

Staring into Ramona’s fiery eyes he choked out, “I have a little brother. I know what it’s like. I’d do anything for him.”

Ramona growled, tightening her hold for a moment. “Then you should understand more than anyone.”

She shoved him roughly to the ground, stalking towards a surprised Aviva and unhooking her chain. “My brother is dying because of you.”

She looked back at the feverish blonde, struggling to get back on his feet, “I’d do anything to save him.”

Notes:

I love how last chapter I was like teeheehee medical accuracy and then this chapter I'm like fuck it, vodka on the stab wound

You should not clean out wounds with alcohol!!! Unless it's an absolute emergency and that's literally the only thing you have. Soap and water are the best things you can use to clean a wound! (I may or may not have nearly sliced a finger off a little while back)

and now you are all learning that my entire medical knowledge comes from the fact that I nearly die like every month or so.

thanks so much for reading, commenting, kudos, ect. You're all much appreciated! See you all hopefully next Saturday <3

Chapter 11 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/150235399>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_11_endnotes\)](#).)

The sun was setting again and Koki had still been trying to reverse the tracking signal of the microchip. She was knowledgeable of robotics, but not nearly as quick and efficient as Aviva. And while she could tune up the Tortuga in a few hours, she wasn’t used to working with something so small. She didn’t want to admit it, but she was hitting a wall. The

anxiety of her friend's well-being resting on her shoulders was starting to take its toll, her hands shaking as she picked apart the coding again and again trying to reverse Aviva's work.

Chris had busied himself with breaking down the analysis of the syringe they had found, and unsurprisingly, there was a disturbing mix of animal DNA in the compound. As Chris began to run out of tasks, Koki could tell he was getting restless.

She spared a glance to his right arm, which had been resting on the counter as he worked.

"Chris?" She caught his attention and he responded with a hum, not looking up from the microscope he was adjusting. "Are you alright?"

"I really wish people would stop asking me that," he sighed, but there was no anger in his voice.

"Then you should probably stop doing things that would justify getting asked," Koki couldn't help but scold. She had tried not to be too overbearing with her concern, knowing Martin had been doing enough of that for the whole crew. She knew Chris appreciated it, but still, even she needed some reassurance.

Before they could continue their conversation, a loud knock reverberated through the metal exterior, the sound originating from the Tortuga's main hatch.

After a brief glance, Koki hastily pulled up the security feed, surprising both her and Chris by what they saw.

Considering he had knocked so politely, despite the impatient frown on his face, Koki opened the door, stepping out onto the ramp along with Chris to meet face-to-face with none other than Zach Varmitech.

Zach opened his mouth to speak, but the words seemed caught in his throat as he made eye contact with Chris. They both seemed a little surprised to see each other. Zach's eyes were caught on Chris, taking in his appearance which made Chris shift in discomfort, suddenly self conscious of his white hair and the visible scars on his face and arms.

Chris returned the uncomfortable stare, unsure how to react to his presence. He reasoned he should feel angry, or maybe nervous, Mostly he just felt uneasy. He took note of the faded bruises on his skin and the sling his arm was resting in.

"Varmitech?" Koki questioned, interrupting their staring contest. Her tone was tilted, annoyance clear on her face. They really didn't have time for whatever scheme he was planning. However, there was a suspicious lack of Zachbots in the vicinity. "We're kinda in the middle of something, so if this could wait--"

"I'm here to help."

Chris and Koki both blinked in confusion. Koki's brows turned more towards anger and she opened her mouth to tell him to get lost before Chris beat her to the chase.

"Why?" Chris' face scrunched in genuine interest, as Koki closed her mouth, biting the insult on her tongue.

"Diego double-crossed me, isn't it obvious?" Zach rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, but from the nervous way he glanced between them he was clearly lying. "I want revenge."

"How'd you even know we were in pursuit of Diego?" Koki squinted suspiciously.

"All over the news, there's a guy in a big cat mask shooting up some animal-lover party. It was kinda hard to miss."

Koki looked down on him unimpressed, but Chris continued to scan his face, sensing his intentions. Chris knew he had no right to trust him. Even if Diego did double-cross him in the end, Zach had been fully on board with reprogramming that suit. Diego pulled the strings but Zach was the one who crafted them.

And here Zach was, anxiously on their doorstep offering his services. If he wanted to go after Diego he didn't need their help to do so. Something else drew him here, and Chris couldn't quite place what it was.

The reasonable side of him wanted to sock Zach in the face and tell him just how stupid he was. But another part of him saw just how valuable someone like Varmitech could be in this situation. His own discrepancies aside, they needed help.

"We're trying to hack a microchip tracker. Can you get it online?" Chris asked, much to Koki's dismay.

"Pshh, I could get it to do your taxes in half an hour," Zach bragged with confidence, his shoulders relaxing as he wasn't immediately rejected.

Aviva worked silently with Ramona tinkering across the table. From her outburst in their cell, Aviva had finally gotten a glimpse of the full picture and it became unclear to her if Ramona was capable of being reasoned with.

Familial loyalty was a very powerful force.

With her negotiation plans falling short, Aviva continued to work on small features of the suit, hoping to stall while she thought of a different approach. The most she could do at the moment was keep Martin and herself alive while awaiting

some kind of rescue.

However, with each passing minute that the remote deactivation module remained offline, she grew more and more anxious.

She never doubted her friends, but she knew firsthand just how difficult Diego could be to find. She was certain that they didn't intend to keep her and Martin around for three months. She could only rely on her valuable skills to keep her alive for so long before they grew impatient.

"I was an only child." She blurted out without much of a plan. Maybe she wanted some sort of comfort, or maybe she just couldn't stand the silence. "I had a lot of younger cousins though."

Ramona didn't respond, merely tweaking a component of the vest that was looking more and more like a power suit.

"But it was still difficult," Aviva added. "Being held to a higher standard than them because I was the oldest. When I was around, it was like I was expected to take care of them. I was still a kid just like them."

The dark-haired woman stayed silent, but she hadn't stopped Aviva either. She just seemed tired. They had been working almost non-stop for over a day after all, but it was a deeper kind of exhaustion.

"It was so frustrating when I would work so hard, and it seemed that they could do the bare minimum and still get twice the praise." Aviva was more or less just venting at this point, She was unsure anymore if her story had any relevance to her current situation. "I know my worth now, and I'm around plenty of people who know it too."

Aviva finished, reminiscing on her friends and all the adventures they had been on. Sure, she still had plenty of knuckleheads to look out for, but they watched her back just as ferociously. Which is why she had to have faith they were coming. And as she continued to delicately install the remote activation module in small increments, she had to be ready when they got here.

Aviva jumped when the door violently swung open, the handle bashing into the wall as it did so. Diego stumbled in as if he were drunk, a violent sneer on his face. He gripped the doorway to keep himself upwards as he hissed, "I want a status report."

Aviva couldn't stop herself from taking a step back as Ramona's eyes fixed on the empty syringe device in his hand.

"Did you take another one?!" She stood up, marched towards him, and snatched it away from him. "Are you unable to follow instructions, or are you just plain stupid?! I said use them sparingly!"

Diego violently shoved her away with a yell, eyes trained on Aviva. Aviva backed into the table, accidentally knocking a few tools to the ground as she did so. His eyes were unfocused and wild, beads of sweat were collecting on his forehead, and his shoulders trembled with restlessness.

Aviva could barely move as his clammy hand clenched around her throat, bringing their faces uncomfortably close. His eyes were swimming with impulsion and anger like he didn't even know what he was doing, nor did it seem like he cared.

"Diego!" Ramona bellowed from somewhere behind him, but Aviva's fearful eyes did not once break away.

The hand tightened, choking her as she felt her esophagus strain under the pressure. And for a moment, she thought... *she was going to die.*

Diego was going to kill her.

Suddenly an arm wrapped around Diego's and forcefully pulled him away, dropping the gasping inventor to her knees as her hands shot up to caress her neck.

Ramona was yelling, and from the rapid way Diego's jaw moved he was yelling back. But their shouts were drowned out by Aviva's own heartbeat as she drew in air as if she were starving.

A small beeping notification brought silence to the room; a confused type of silence. Aviva hadn't even noticed it until she saw the flashing screen of Diego's watch. She couldn't help but watch with frightened curiosity as Diego tapped the watch, a holographic map appearing in the air and a blinking light moving towards the center.

Diego seemed to sober completely, back straightening in focus, and making deadly eye contact with Ramona. She nodded, a silent conversation taking place.

"Time's up, Miss Corcovado," Diego turns his head ever so slightly in her direction; his eyes burning with anger.

Zach was true to his word, and the microchip had been up and broadcasting in less than half an hour. Tracing back the signal, the Tortuga was en route to a penthouse built into a cliffside, right next to a dam.

The make-shift crew stood around the main console as they anxiously prepared for their arrival. Both Chris and Koki were clad in their respective power suits. After Chris' rescue, and the major upgrades to the suits, Aviva had focused a lot

of her time on stabilizing the purple and orange power suits. Koki wore her orange vest with pride, confident in her numerous test runs.

“Zach’s going to take the front, using his hologram Zachbots as decoys,” Chris explained, motioning to the satellite view map of the cliffside that was displayed on the table.

“They’re built to be realistic, but they’re quite literally made of light. They won’t actually hold up in a confrontation,” Zach crossed his arms as he gained their attention. “The second Diego touches one of them, he’ll know it’s a ruse.”

“You have hyperrealistic holograms... of all of us?” Koki raised a judging eyebrow in his direction.

“Well... yeah...” Zach kicked his foot as if he were embarrassed, folding his arms over his chest.

“-Which means we need to be quick,” Chris continued, ignoring the side tangent. “Koki was able to download the schematics of the building. Jimmy, you and I will take the top two floors, and Koki will clear the bottom.”

Koki nodded, holding out the four new earpieces she had crafted for the operation, “We keep in contact the whole time, and the second we have Aviva and Martin, we get out of there. Their safety is our priority and the goal is zero confrontation.”

“My favorite kind of confrontation!” Jimmy joked nervously as he adjusted his earpiece. He barely joined them on creature adventures, so to say this was out of his league was the understatement of the century.

Chris knew he was asking a lot of his friends. He was in over his own head just trying to lead the rescue. He’s never been a very confident decision-maker; second guessing almost every action he takes. Following his brother’s footsteps through adolescence and young adulthood had mostly eliminated that stress from his life. Some would call it codependency; Chris preferred to just consider it a close brotherly relationship. However, it was rare moments like these, where he had no choice but to turn towards the one gift his anxiety brought him. Constantly worrying over hypotheticals and worst-case scenarios has at least led to one positive outcome: his extensive planning.

It gave him comfort to schedule the entire mission down to the minute. He could practically imagine Martin and Aviva already safe by the amount of times he’s rolled it over in his head. He tried to spare the rest of the makeshift team of some of the more bizarre backup plans but reassured them he had considered every scenario and would be able to guide them through any hiccup.

Jimmy had barely relaxed at that reassurance, but his determination hadn’t wavered in the slightest. Which gave Chris the confidence to nod knowingly at Koki.

The communication specialist had approached him earlier about a secret Aviva had been harboring for months. While Koki had no intentions of betraying her best friend’s trust, she decided the situation was too dire to keep it any longer.

“Jimmy, there’s something we need to tell you,” Koki began calmly, trying not to startle their friend further who shot a look in her direction of wide and uncertain eyes. “Aviva and I didn’t think you would quite appreciate it yet, so we’ve been saving it for when you were ready...”

Koki began to unlock a metal briefcase-looking box. “But I think we can all agree that we can’t afford to hold anything back this time.” She began pulling out a very familiar red vest that had Jimmy stepping back a few steps in shock. “She started on it not long after mine, but since you haven’t done any field testing, we don’t know how stable the transformations will be.” She knew Aviva was correct in her decision to postpone giving Jimmy his suit by the shell-shocked look on his face.

“You... want *me* to wear *that*?” Jimmy pointed at the vest in Koki’s hands, the rest of his body leaned backward as if it would burn him to get any closer. “I think I should just stick to the taser...”

“You don’t have to use it. In fact, I’d prefer if you don’t,” Chris reassured. He would never force anyone in a suit, much less one of his friends. “But if we get separated, I’d feel better knowing you had a way to defend yourself.”

Jimmy swallowed harshly, anxious eyes studying the vest and gloves, and the small group could see his determination overtake him, slowly inching towards the suit until it was in his hands. He was still slightly shaking as he pulled it over his head and adjusted it into his torso. But when he looked back up his expression was hardened. “Anything for Viva and Martin,” He proclaimed.

Koki gave a proud smile before scooping up the gloves and shutting its case. “Come on, we’ll get you situated and I can show you how to activate it.”

As she led Jimmy to a more open part of the hub, Chris and Zach were left with an awkward silence as they leaned over the map.

“Sure, let’s throw another creature power suit at the problem. I’m sure that’ll fix it.” Zach mumbled under his breath, but Chris ignored it.

Partially alone with the CEO for the first time, Chris took a deep breath before addressing him, “Why are you here, Zach?” The man in question opened his mouth to respond, but Chris cut him off with, “And don’t say revenge, ‘cause we both know that’s not true. You’ve had all this time to go after Diego; you don’t need our help for that.”

Zach stood in stunned silence for a moment at the bluntness of Chris' evaluation. He kept trying to make eye contact with the green-clad adventurer, but his eyes would wander as if they couldn't focus on him for longer than a few seconds.

Chris waited patiently for a response, and after a few tense minutes, Zach sighed. "It's not for some heroic reason if that's what you're trying to get out of me."

"I don't really have high expectations," Chris stated truthfully, though without malice.

"Well, good, because it's selfish," Zach admitted unapologetically, but he still looked shamefully at the ground. "I lie awake at night thinking about him, thinking about what I did. I can't... move on."

"Call it a conscience, call it regret; I don't care what it is," Zach finally met Chris' neutral expression. "I just want to be able to look at you again without feeling so goddamn *guilty*."

Chris hummed, soaking in Zach's response. He hadn't really had time to consider his opinion on Zach recently; too busy worrying about Diego and his own sanity. He mostly just felt confused. They never discuss it, but Zach had been a friend once; years and years ago, back when they were still just children catching frogs in the creek. Any semblance of kinship had died a long time ago, and Chris wouldn't even consider their history complicated. Zach chose his path, and Chris never felt any sort of mourning for it. He'd known Zach as an enemy far longer than he did a friend.

"If it gets my family back in one piece, I don't really care why you're doing it," Chris answered. He noticed Zach's expression fall slightly as if he were disappointed. "But if you're looking for forgiveness, I don't know if I can give that to you."

Zach had diverted his eyes again staring at the map. "I don't want you to forgive me." He didn't deserve as much. "I just want to prove that I'm not like him."

Zach managed to look back at Chris' scarred face, "Diego's not a villain. He's a monster."

Aviva's fleeting face of death felt so minuscule when a pistol clicked, only two feet away from her face. She couldn't help the frightened scream as she flinched backward, gripping the table behind her with all her strength.

"Diego, No!" Ramona's hand flew to his wrist, aiming the gun at the floor. Diego gave a low growl at her touch, but she was quick to explain herself. "The suit's not complete. You said three days. Let's take care of these pests and then have her finish the job."

Diego considered her words for a moment, soaking in the open display of fear that Aviva was too emotional to try and hide. "Fine," he sighed, shoving the gun into Ramona's hands as he approached the stand the vest was currently displayed on. It looked similar to any other power suit, though it was much bulkier, and had wires and mechanics exposed like nerves. He unceremoniously shrugged it on, Pulling the mismatching gloves over his hands. The claws of his prosthetic pierced through the fabric, as it shaped awkwardly over the skeletal metal. "Tell Carmen to dispose of the one rotting in the basement. I'm done playing these games."

Ramona bit her tongue throughout the process, not willing to risk turning Diego's hatred towards her. Instead, she slipped the gun into the back of her belt, making a brief glance at Aviva who had slid to the floor to gather herself.

Their eyes met and for a fleeting moment, Aviva recognized something like sorrow, but in an instant, it was gone. Before Aviva could speak further, they hurried out of the room, slamming the metal door, and leaving Aviva alone to the echo it produced.

Notes:

Hi silly geese!

Despite the horrors, I am back /lh

I don't mean to diss Koki or her skills, but I mean... c'mon if she could just do everything Aviva can, why would Diego even bother kidnapping Aviva at this point? ALSO SLIGHT ZACH REDEMPTION??? Paisley could never...

I think I've realized what I don't like about this next chapter, and I've decided I'm going to split it into two parts. I think I was just trying to rush to the ending because I was excited to write that part. So I'm going to be rewriting next chapter a little bit. It shouulddd be out next Saturday, I'll update on my tumblr if that's not the case.

Thanks for all the very sweet comments last chapter btw <3 I appreciate you guys!

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_12_endnotes\)](#).)

Martin had managed to prop himself against the wall before the fleeting strength left him once more. He was freezing from the damp sweat that coated his skin, yet his face felt like it was being held next to a flame. He was critically dehydrated, and it wasn't just his chapped lips and dry tongue that confirmed it.

He was dizzy and he could feel his heart start to race at random intervals as if he weren't just lying on the floor. In his misery, Martin had no one to blame but himself.

He should have been keeping a better watch on his own back... how stupid of him, to get roofied at a party. While playing the blame game, Martin could take it back even further. He should have noticed when something was off with Chris; he should have confronted him earlier.

And long before that, he should have done more than just shove his brother's kidnapper out of a plane.

Now Aviva was in danger because of his negligence.

He couldn't be sure how much time had passed, floating in and out of consciousness as he was, but he knew it was nearing their three-day limit. By the way they abandoned him with a raging infection, it didn't seem like they had plans to keep him around for much longer.

Still, he fought the exhaustion that pulled at his body. He wasn't sure he would be able to stand even if he wanted to, but he refused to leave Aviva alone in this place. He would protect her with his dying breath, which unfortunately would be relatively soon on his current trajectory.

Unable to control his thoughts, they wandered down that dark path, the one that had his story ending in a basement. The team would need a new leader. Maybe Aviva? She was supposed to have that role initially but wanted the freedom to spend more time on her projects. Koki would be a great choice. She was strong and determined, always looking out for others. Jimmy had never wanted that position, but Martin had no doubt his friend would be able to overcome his cowardice if the situation called for him. Jimmy had always been so loyal...

Chris?... Chris would be devastated, and that thought alone was almost enough to break his spiral. In past years, Martin would be able to confidently say his brother would step up to the task, and take care of his friends in Martin's place.

But things were a little different these days... *Chris* was different these days. Despite the nightmares, and the isolation, and the defeat... Martin could still see the fire behind his eyes. He watched his brother grip and claw and drag himself away from that edge every single time, no matter how beaten he was when he was pushed toward it. He was desperate and determined to make a change; to take hold of his own life.

Martin had never seen anyone fight that hard over anything.

And despite Chris being so damn stubborn and unwilling to let anyone help him, Martin knew... if he didn't get out of this basement, Chris wouldn't be able to catch himself this time.

He couldn't let this be the straw that finally broke Chris. He couldn't let Diego have that victory.

Martin nearly jumped out of his skin as something rattled the walls, and then there was a flurry of sounds coming from the floor above. Muffled shouting, gunshots, and shattering glass had Martin straightening himself into a more upward position as his eyes glued to the dark concrete ceiling.

The loud metal door pulled his attention away as it was hastily opened and closed just as quickly. Carmen huffed as if she had just run a mile, wasting no time in dropping to the floor beside Martin, pulling something from her pocket, and fiddling with the cuffs around his wrists.

Martin blinked in confusion as she picked one of the locks, moving swiftly to the next one. "Wh?-"

"Your friends are here," She explained in an anxious tone. Martin felt a swell of relief open his lungs.

Being able to see her so close for the first time, Martin reminisced that she couldn't be older than Chris. The only other time he'd been in her presence, she seemed relaxed and carefree, but now she was shaking with fear, constantly checking over her shoulder at the door. He couldn't bring himself to be threatened by her presence, and strangely found some obligation to grab her hand in comfort.

Carmen's head shot back towards Martin in surprise, swiftly pulling her hand away. Her face hardened as she removed his last cuff, and grunted as she grabbed him under his arms, heaving him into a standing position.

Martin barely caught his footing, leaning heavily against the wall so he didn't topple onto the much shorter woman, who miraculously had the strength to lift him. It wasn't until now that he realized she had *freed* him.

Martin tried to lean away, to support himself, but Carmen shoved him back against the wall, pinning his shoulders with her hands and standing on her toes to bring their faces as close as possible.

"I don't care what happens to Diego, but I swear to God if you touch a hair on my sister's head, no one will walk away from this," She hissed at him, eyes wide with a mix of fury and desperation. Martin quickly nodded in agreement as her nails started digging into his shoulder. "All he's ever done is hurt her," She added in a softer voice. Carmen searched his eyes for a moment before shoving something into his hand and rushing back to the door.

She paused for only a moment, barely turning her head towards him. "Viva is upstairs; at the end of the corridor, the door on the right." And with that, she was gone, the door being left open only a crack.

The blonde couldn't help his stunned silence, processing such an unpredictable decision until another boom shook the walls and reminded Martin of the supposed confrontation that was happening.

He opened his fist; it was the key she had just used to free him.

"You're running out of time, rats!" Zach yelled into his earpiece. He was a safe distance from the penthouse, manually controlling the dozen or so Zachbots that he had running around Diego's property. The three disguised as Koki, Jimmy, and Chris had been dodging gunshots and slipping out of punches as Diego and Ramona practically destroyed their grand entrance trying to catch them. The explosives that the other Zachbots were meticulously placing around the house's foundation were also doing well to keep the pair distracted.

Through the eyes of the Zachbots, Zach had noticed Diego in a bulky vest; a twisted version of a creature power suit, though he had yet to try and activate it.

And while Zach's holographic bots made fantastic illusions, light particles couldn't actually fight back. Soon enough Diego would realize their lack of offense is more than a strategy.

"Third floor is cleared, we're heading down to the second," Chris updated, his breath short as if he were running.

"No sign of them yet," Koki announced, she was whispering and faint echoes of the skirmish at the front of the house could be heard in the background of her line. "I'm going to head closer to the distraction point."

It was only a matter of time before Diego's hands managed to claw through the holographic Chris, hitting metal before the facade fell, leaving only a shattered Zachbot in its place.

"Shit..." Zach muttered under his breath as both Diego and Ramona paused in contemplation. "You're on your own now, Kratts..." He warned before disconnecting his communicator. "Good luck."

Diego shook before letting out a visceral yell that echoed throughout the house, He grabbed the shredded Zachbot throwing it into another one of the holographs, destroying them both as they toppled out of a window.

Another small explosion rocked the house as Koki nearly stumbled into a wall. She grumbled a little, catching herself. If Zach kept it up, they'd all be buried before Diego could even find them.

She broke back into a sprint, allowing the extra noise to cover her footsteps. According to the blueprints she found, there was a sublevel of the house near the entrance.

Luck finally seemed to be on her side when she turned a corner in one of the many long hallways and ran face-first into a very familiar, very alive friend.

Before she could help it, she let out a shout of surprise at the sudden appearance of another person, before catching herself by grabbing his arms.

"Koki!?" Martin steadied her, as she jumped back.

"Martin!" Koki gasped in relief, a wide grin broke out on her face and she couldn't stop herself from barreling into his arms, wrapping her own around his neck. However, at his loud hiss of pain, she immediately pulled back, placing a hand on his cheek as she quickly scanned over him. "Oh, Martin..."

"I'm fine!" Martin whisper-yelled, placing a hand over the one on his cheek and gently removing it. "We don't have much time; we need to get to-"

"Ugh, Carmen..." a deep voice grumbled, emerging from the shadows at the end of the hall. His prosthetic arm clawed the wall as he approached, leaving shredded lines in the detailed wallpaper. "It's so hard to find reliable help these days... I do miss your brother's eager loyalty."

Koki and Martin froze, the blonde immediately pushing in front to shield Koki from view despite her struggles against it.

Diego's limp was less prominent, and the bulky vest clanked with every step as loose pieces rattled together. His silhouette looked more mechanical than human at this point. Ramona was close behind him, a pistol in hand, and pointed at

the floor. Her eyes caught on Martin's with determination.

It seemed that whatever was about to happen, she'd already made her peace with it.

Aviva threw another broken tool across the room with a yell of frustration as once again the chains had bested her. She'd been fighting restlessly with her metal bindings since she had been left alone and doubled her efforts when the sounds of a struggle began to fill the walls.

She was nearly in tears by the time she bent a flimsy wrench beyond usefulness; banging it fruitlessly against the chain. She had to get *out*. She was smart enough to build a goddamn time machine and she couldn't get out of a pair of handcuffs?

If Diego used that suit to hurt anyone... the blood would be on her hands. And if that blood happened to belong to one of her friends...

She had justified the last reprogrammed suit with Zach's meddling, but there were no excuses this time. She built that vest with her own two hands, knowing Diego's intentions with it. Whatever he was trying to do, it was her responsibility to put a stop to it.

She threw the wrench at the wall and began frantically pulling at the chain, ignoring the sharp pain in her wrist as it tugged against her flesh.

What she hoped was for the chain to somehow break loose, but what she didn't expect was for the door to be kicked open, hitting her square in the shoulder.

She let out a startled and pained yell as she fell forward which was followed immediately with a gasp and a rush of familiar hands to help her up.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't know you were right there!" Chris frantically apologized as he rubbed her shoulder which was already starting to turn red from the impact.

"Chris?!" Aviva gasped, not quite believing her eyes as a mop of red hair followed right behind him and helped her off the floor from the other side. "Jimmy?!"

"Everything's alright, Viva!" Jimmy reassured quickly pulling out one of Aviva's pocket buzzsaws to cut away her chains. "We're getting you out of here."

She kept shifting her eyes between them, breathless from her fall. Maybe it was the dehydration, maybe she had just been awake for far too long, but she couldn't stop the tears that gathered in her eyes and spilled over her cheeks.

"Aviva?" Chris caressed the side of her head to get a good look at her. His eyes were wide with concern as he looked over her torn dress and smudged makeup. "Are you hurt?"

The inventor couldn't do much but shake her head as she hiccuped with quiet sobs. She knew they would come. She was too relieved, too emotional to even speak. She had been strong only because she had to be. Only because Martin's life depended on it, but she had been so, so *scared*. But having two of her closest friends, gently lifting her from the ground, surrounding her, and shielding her from the rest of the room, was the first glimpse of safety she'd felt in days.

"Martin," She finally sniffled, taking deep breaths to try and dry her eyes. There was still more work to be done and she could have a proper cry when all of her friends were safe in her arms. "We need to-"

"I have Martin!" Koki's voice pierced through the comms loud enough for even Aviva to hear. "We need backup downstairs! Diego, he's!-" She was cut off with a grunt.

Martin had tackled her to the floor as several shots rang out; bullets tearing into the wall behind them. Martin struggled to pull himself off of Koki as the stab wound began furiously bleeding once more, soaking the bindings that covered it.

Koki let out a yell of protest when a large hand grabbed Martin by the shoulders, throwing him into the opposite wall, where he barely managed to turn and absorb the impact from his uninjured side. Diego was upon him, pinning him to the wall like lightning, but when Koki scrambled to her feet to intervene, a heeled boot had made itself known to her gut.

Ramona kicked her back down, standing over her with the pistol aimed at her chest. "It's nothing personal," She clarified, yet she still seemed to hesitate.

Only allowing herself to freeze for a second, Koki's leg kicked up, dislodging the gun from her hand, and used the momentum to summersault out from underneath Ramona.

Just as Koki finally got to her feet, Diego forcefully threw Martin once more, his deadweight knocking into Koki from behind and causing her to stumble to her knees. Martin had landed with an arm over her in protection, head whipping up to keep his eyes on their attackers.

A steady stream of blood was now leaking from Martin's nose, smearing over his mouth and chin from when he attempted to wipe it away. Between his torn-open shirt and the blood-soaked clothing, he looked like he rolled around in a crime scene.

Using the fact that Martin's arm was already swung over her shoulder, Koki grasped his arm and wrapped her own around his waist to help him to his feet. She could tell he was biting down a yell as they rose, but all that escaped his gritted teeth was a pained grunt.

Ramona and Diego regrouped and began stalking towards them once more. An aura of victory surrounded them, with a proud and egotistical smile planted on the man's face.

"Martin, let me handle this," Koki whispered, planting herself in front of the blonde. He tried to protest but the moment her support left, he struggled just to stand on his own. A wave of dizziness and nausea hit him, stealing his attention as he focused on gripping his side.

They were running out of time, Martin had lost too much blood and the longer they delayed getting him help, the more his chances of surviving dropped. Koki reached into her pocket and gently brushed against the bundle of fur she had collected for this occasion.

She let out a startling yell, "Activate creature powers!" With a tap of her chest and a flash of orange, she emerged with a prance, two large ears atop of her head, and claws unsheathed from her fingertips. She couldn't help the giddy smile as she proudly wore the red fox suit for the first time.

Ramona merely raised an eyebrow, taking aim with her gun and firing several rounds. With the instincts of a fox, Koki quickly dodged around the shots, bounding into the air before tackling her to the velvet carpet.

Their tussle had brought them to the center of the first floor, just in front of the grand staircase that led upwards. Several chiseled pillars supported the tall ceiling, and Koki weaved behind them dodging Ramona's shots. She was desperately trying to make a run back towards the hall where Martin was left unprotected, but Ramona stood her ground, striking out with a hefty punch that Koki just barely escaped, leaving a fist-sized crater in one of the pillars she had been hiding behind.

Koki swung around the other side of the pillar, kicking out both feet which connected with Ramona's side, knocking the air out of her lungs and sending her gun flying.

The fox rolled to her knees, shooting up to run back towards where she unintentionally left her friend, before getting knocked off her feet by the impact of his body colliding with her's once more.

She ended up on her back, with Martin sprawled on top of her, even less conscious than before. "Martin?!" She shook his shoulder slightly, struggling to push him off of her.

Loud uneven footsteps that Koki could feel through the floor approached through the dimmed hallway. The shadows split as Diego's hulking form emerged dripping with intimidation and rage. He wiped a speck of red from his mouth where Martin must have gotten in a good hit.

Koki doubled her efforts in attempting to free herself from where she was pinned, but Martin remained unresponsive to her calls which escalated in desperation.

"I'd say it's been a pleasure," Diego grunted out as he stopped in front of them, his back turned to the staircase. "But that'd be a lie." He flexed his metal claws, enlisting a sharp hiss from them as they briefly scraped against each other.

Koki couldn't help but flinch as he suddenly pounced with a visceral yell that echoed throughout the room. His claws reared back with enough momentum to shred through them both like paper.

Time seemed to freeze, the sharp metal only inches away from her skin. Koki's eyes were wide with terror and all she could do was wrap her arms tight around the body that kept her in place, desperate to defend him even if it meant using her own skin as a shield. She buried her face into his side, unable to face her fate.

Her large ears twitched when a louder cry overpowered her attacker's
"DIEGO!"

And Koki felt the air displacement of a force passing right overhead, yet the pain she was bracing for never struck. She peaked up only to see Jimmy and Aviva racing down the staircase in front of her, with a loud rumble and a series of vicious growls, she tilted her head backward to see a green form of fur and stripes wrestling Diego to the floor.

"Koki! Martin!" By the time she looked back, Jimmy and Aviva were already kneeling beside her, pulling an unconscious Martin off of her so she could scramble to her feet. Jimmy stayed kneeling on the floor, gently cradling Martin when their attention was pulled by a wolverine Chris tumbling to their side. He immediately got back up, and positioned himself defensively in front of the others, followed quickly by Koki who outstretched her claws in front of her.

Ramona seemed to re-emerge behind them, which had Aviva turning to face her, both with nothing but their arms outstretched in promise of attack.

Diego quickly scanned the group as they stood together as a pack. Eyes trailing from one multi-colored vest to the next.

"Gatito..." He purred, eyes landing on Chris who was dripping with anger. "It's funny; No matter where I go, it's like you always come crawling right back to me."

"Don't fucking call me that!" Chris yelled with a force that was foreign to him. The months of agony and guilt had built up, directed to a single point of which they could escape. It didn't help that the wolverine suit had pumped his aggression up tenfold. He was barely containing the urge to lunge.

The instincts were such a fragile thing. Chris used to give in freely, enjoying the authentic feelings of the powers he borrowed from nature. More recently, he was terrified of them. He hadn't used the suit much at all, but when he did, he purposely avoided the more powerful disks. He had briefly given into the coyote suit, desperation overtaking him in the face of Diego, but still, he kept the leash tight.

And seeing where that had gotten him... This time he let go. A feral growl rumbled in his chest, causing Diego to lift a scarred brow.

"Look at you... Giving into your rage," Diego smiled tauntingly. "I knew you were always an animal. I just gave you the freedom to stop pretending you're not."

"You gave me a good fucking reason all right," Chris took a step forward, his long claws outstretched by his side, itching to dig into something. All he wanted was to walk out that door with his family, but if he had to shred through Diego to do it, he'd do so gladly. "And I'm going to make you regret it."

He couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him. "You're not the only one with a little help from the animal kingdom." He twisted the main pawprint of his suit which clicked into a loud whirring sound as the makeshift suit began to spark.

Both Ramona and Aviva's eyes snapped to him as they heard the boot-up procedure. "No..."

Ramona stepped forward but in a more fearful tone she yelled, "Diego **wait!**"

Diego ignored her pleas as he slammed his fist on the button and a brilliant red light exploded, engulfing the room and forcing its residents to turn their eyes.

A scream pierced through their overloaded senses.

Notes:

Fun game: take a shot every time Martin eats shit in this chapter...

So this is the chapter that I had to split in half and also kinda re-write... because if not it would've been 10k words... And I didn't like the pacing of it. I'm genuinely getting a little sad that I'll be finishing it soon :(like wdyam I'm not gonna be updating my silly fanfiction every Saturday?

But alas it must come to an end... and yes, this will be the final installment of the series. I may revisit some plot points one day with some one-shots, or I've even been thinking of doing a short "What if?" type series. Just because I've had so many people theorize about what would've happened under different circumstances. (Like what if Martin was taken, what if they were taken together, ect.)

But idk! Nothing is set in stone right now.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading, sorry to keep you on the edge of your seat, but more will come next week. <3

Chapter 13 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/151173547>).

Notes:

Hey, so you know how there has been "body horror" in the tags since chapter 1....? yeah this is the chapter that warrants that tag.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_13_endnotes\)](#).)

Chris had planned for things to go wrong. They tended to do that when he was involved. He had a plan for Diego to have help. He had a plan for a reprogrammed suit 2.0 scenario.

He couldn't have ever envisioned this.

Diego's scream was almost inhuman as his bones began to pop and muscles contorted under his skin; morphing and misshaping into an incomprehensible figure. He fell to the floor, claws outstretched as he ripped through the carpet. Extra appendages sprouted from his body with nauseating squelches, snapping into place with cracks like gunshots. The metal in the prosthetics fused with his skin, twisting and shaping over new limbs and crawling up his neck and over the side of his face. His jaw gave a loud pop as it unhinged, fangs protruding from his gums too big to fit in his mouth. Spines, scales, and furs grew from his skin in patches, bubbling to the surface by tearing open the flesh. His howl took on a more animalistic sound, accompanied by wheezing gasps and gurgles.

As the transformation slowed, and the screams of pain died, what peeled itself off the floor and stumbled into a standing position was unrecognizable as either human or animal.

The room was stunned into a fearful silence, eyes trained on the monster whose head was still snapped back, staring straight at the ceiling, drawing in labored breath.

"Hermano?..." Ramona asked, barely louder than a whisper.

He seemed to freeze.

His head rolled forward with a snap. Bloodshot eyes, wild and unseeing, trained immediately on Ramona. Before anyone could even flinch, the beast was on all fours, leaping with a snarled growl and jaw unhinged revealing the rows of teeth.

The Wild Kratts couldn't even duck as he soared right past them, metal-encased claws reared back and hungry for blood.

"MONA!"

Carmen had appeared out of nowhere, hugging her arms around her sister with unmatched speed, as a set of mutilated claws came raining down. They tore through her clothing and her flesh like wax, leaving behind craters, in her back.

The room had gone completely silent, save for a scream of agony as the force had shoved both women to the floor.

Ramona's eyes had gone wide with stunned disbelief, her arms instinctively cradled around the smaller body as they fell. Only when they finally hit the floor, Diego's monstrous form looming over them, did she realize what just happened.

Her hand shakily traveled up her sister's back, feeling the moist clothing already stained by the blood that gushed from her wounds. Carmen was trembling in her arms, and Ramona could feel her quick panicked breaths in the crook of her neck.

Chris' shocked gaze shot down to the floor as he heard a strained voice. Worry engulfed him as he properly took in his brother's appearance for the first time. He looked dead.

"Carmen..." Martin's eyes were only half open and dazed, with a hand stretched out weakly towards the sisters.

Chris' brow furrowed in confusion as he glanced back towards Diego's betrayal. He had never been exceptionally caring towards his employees... but taking a closer look, it seemed they were more than henchmen. At first, he dismissed Martin's sorrowful cry. His brother had always been incredibly empathetic, even to people who didn't deserve it. In his half-conscious state, he could be forgetting the fact these were his kidnappers.

His next mumbled sentence made Chris reconsider, "She freed me..."

He looked back towards the drooling beastly form of Diego, biting his lip with an internal struggle. His priority was the small group within arms reach, and he almost grabbed them and used the distraction to get them to safety.

Martin would jump in to help without hesitation.

He let out a frustrating growl as his morals conflicted with his desires, "Get out of here!" He ordered the group who turned to him with frightened eyes. "I'll be right behind you!"

It looked like they were about to argue with him but Chris didn't stick around to hear it, charging at Diego who was reared back to strike again and tackling him into a wrestling match. The two rolled on the floor, slamming into the pillars and walls leaving craters in their wake.

Aviva's eyes snapped to Ramona who was frantically pulling Carmen into her arms, with wide distraught eyes.

She didn't owe the tigress anything. Ramona had assisted in kidnapping her and defended Diego up until this point. She'd been aggressive with Martin and willingly contributed to the suit that was now melted into Diego's chest. Their bond had been built only as a means to try and escape.

But they were the Wild Kratts. They helped people. And right now, Ramona needed help.

Aviva shakily rose from the ground as Jimmy and Koki pulled Martin up from under his arms. The inventor made a pleading glance at them, "I can't leave her."

Koki's concerned shout of "Aviva!" was ignored as Aviva ran, dodging the two powerhouses that were destroying the room with their tussle, and collapsed on her knees next to Ramona, unintentionally frightening her.

Ramona studied her eyes with confusion as if she didn't understand why Aviva had even come back. She seemed to be in shock, eyes darting from her sister bleeding out on the floor, to the mangled misshapen man, with more limbs than before, roaring as he bit down on the wolverine's shoulder. "This wasn't supposed to happen..."

Aviva anxiously pulled Ramona to her feet, who cradled a whimpering Carmen to her chest. She kept making quick glances at Diego who was tearing into every surface he touched, Chris just barely holding him back from charging towards them. “We need to go, **now!**”

“MOVE!” A shout echoed throughout the room as Diego had finally broken free of Chris’ claws bounding towards them like a bull.

Aviva let out a frightened scream as Ramona pulled her to the floor; Diego soaring over them. Missing his target by mere inches, Diego’s malformed body slammed into the staircase, breaking through the wood as the structure collapsed on him, and letting out a series of howls and grunts as he frantically tried to free himself from the debris.

Ramona kicked back into action, grabbing hold of Aviva’s wrist and making a break towards the main entrance. “THIS WAY!!” She shouted at the crew of creature adventurers as she passed.

The group seemed unsure, but Aviva gave a nod of approval. Trusting her intuition, they wasted no time, Aviva taking over Koki’s spot from under Martin’s arm as the fox took the lead, chasing Ramona while Chris followed close behind, seeing Diego claw free from underneath the staircase out of the corner of his eye as they fled.

The sound of Diego’s uncoordinated leaps reverberated through the penthouse as he slammed into walls and tore through furniture, seemingly unable to run in a straight line. He remained howling and screaming like a rabid animal, chasing after the first prey he’d ever seen.

Chris was sure to shut doors and knock over furniture as he ran, creating more obstacles for the beast who was still getting used to his form.

As they fled the manor, running past the horde of smashed Zachbots, into the chill open night sky, Ramona kept running until they were into cover of the surrounding foliage. The rest of the group was only slightly behind her, gasping as they stopped to catch their breath with Diego nowhere in sight.

“What the fuck **IS** that?!” Jimmy gasped, eyes trained on the front door which Chris had closed and barricaded with a bench from the porch. He and Aviva had slid a fully unconscious Martin to the ground where Chris was quick to take him into his arms, relieved to find a pulse, but unable to turn his focus just yet. The feeling of his chest rising and falling was the only thing that calmed his nerves.

“The power suit was unfinished,” Aviva quickly blurted out. “He didn’t even have a power disk! I have no idea how he-”

“The animal DNA in the injections we found!” Koki interrupted. “He was taking steroids filled with mixed animal DNA!”

“They were supposed to be helping him!” Ramona blurted with guilt. Her cold and determined stature was shattered and she seemed to be trembling in fear. Carmen had been let down on uneasy feet, grasping Ramona’s arm for support. “I was developing them to help his condition, but he just kept taking them! Far more than he needed!”

“All of that mixed input...” Chris whispered looking towards Aviva for confirmation, his arms tightening around his brother.

“The suit merged all of the DNA...” Aviva fearfully answered. “A chimera...”

The group anxiously paused, noticing the lack of sound coming from the penthouse. The constant smashing and yelling had ceased, leaving only their strained breaths.

“What are we supposed to *do* about it though?!” Jimmy fearfully yelled under his breath. “Ask him politely to take it off?”

Chris had gotten a pretty up-close and personal look at the former man. The mechanisms of the suit had all but fused with his skin. He wasn’t sure if separating the two were even possible.

A pained groan from Martin stole Chris’ attention and he cupped the side of his brother’s warm face with a paw. The make-shift bandages wrapping his side were stained a rusty color of dried blood and if possible he looked even paler.

“He needs a hospital,” Chris gave a desperate look to his friends.

“The closest town is about 40 miles North,” Ramona quickly provided.

Suspicious of her sudden eagerness to help, Chris opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted as a large beastly form jumped out of the bushes from their right, snapping his jaws on the closest thing in sight, which happened to be Koki’s arm.

The group let out various screams of surprise and horror as Diego tugged harshly, nearly pulling the fox’s arm out of its socket as she was yanked toward him.

“LET HER GO!” In a flash of bright red, Jimmy had pulled one of the quills from Aviva’s necklace out of his pocket and was suddenly engulfed in the spiny suit of porcupine powers.

He jumped toward the beast, facing his back and giving Diego a face full of quills. The chimera released Koki’s arm with a howl, viciously clawing at his face as he stumbled backward. His extra limbs swiped their claws, tearing huge chunks out of the surrounding trees.

Cradling her mangled arm close to her chest, Koki scrambled back towards the others, Jimmy with his quills outstretched, acted as a barrier between Diego and her.

With the brief moment of opportunity, the group blindly ran further into the woods. The strength of the wolverine suit had allowed Chris to situate Martin onto his back, ears twitching as the roars of Diego echoed somewhere behind them.

“We can’t just keep running!” Aviva huffed, nearly tripping as her tattered dress snagged on a bush. “He’s got the creature powers of a dozen animals, he’s going to track us!”

“We have to deactivate the suit!” Chris yelled and came to a sliding stop as they broke free of the tree grove, arriving at the large concrete dam.

Their previous plans of evacuation were crumbling. They had just run in the opposite direction of the Tortuga, and a rampaging beast was loose in the woods tracking their every move. If they didn’t stop Diego now, there was no telling what kind of horrors they would be unleashing by leaving him here.

Aviva gasped when she realized, “I was able to partially install the remote deactivation module!” She turned to the group, hands shaking with adrenaline, “I might be able to reconfigure one of your creaturepods to send the signal!”

Smiles of hope broke out amongst them, but Ramona’s face fell. Aviva turned towards her with a more grim look. It seems she had already realized it, but still, Aviva informed her, “But it wasn’t finished... forcefully shutting down a suit in that unstable of a state...”

“Would kill him,” Ramona finished, eyes trailing back to the woods where his roars became louder as he approached, shaking the trees he clumsily passed.

“Our brother is *gone*, Mona,” Carmen whispered with a wince as she shifted. “He has been for a long time.”

Eyes trained on the tigress warily, as if they were debating to trust her. Even Carmen gave her sister a pleading look as Ramona turned her uncertain gaze toward the group.

“He was dead the moment he laid a hand on you.” Her eyes landed on Carmen, and the torn lines in her jacket and the blood that was staining her shirt. “I can help buy you some time,” Ramona finally said with a strained voice.

Chris let out a relieved breath that they wouldn’t have to deal with yet another hurdle. Aviva seemed to have built some sort of trust between the women, but Chris had no qualms about taking them all down if they became a threat to the lives of his team.

Despite the plan throwing itself out the window, down a ravine, and into the fiery pits of hell, Chris still spoke with confidence like he had one, “Jimmy, take Martin and get Aviva somewhere safe!”

Jimmy gave a sharp nod, they situated Martin between Aviva and him and limped as fast as they could towards the cover of another patch of foliage.

Martin groaned, just barely able to lift his head and get a blurry view of his brother as they fled before his eyes slipped shut again.

Diego finally broke through the treeline, galloping towards them in a mess of limbs and animalistic sounds.

“Koki, are you gonna be alright?” Chris asked without taking his eyes off the incoming threat, bracing for the impact with outstretched claws.

“It’s about time I got to say thank you for that nose job,” She joined him alongside Ramona and Carmen.

It was Ramona who threw the first punch before the uncoordinated chimera could readjust himself to begin swiping his claws. He let out a canine-like whine as his head whipped back, before cracking right back into place, eyes with blown-up pupils vibrating in their sockets.

As Diego turned his attention towards her, Chris used the opportunity to slam into his side, elbow-first, using his wolverine strength to knock the beast onto the ground.

The group of four worked effortlessly together, moving in for jabs and swipes while Diego turned his attention to someone else. Despite the hefty craters left in his skin by Chris’ claws or the deep welts from Ramona’s fists, Diego remained completely unfazed. As if he wasn’t even aware of his wounds.

The others, however, were starting to weaken as Diego got a lucky hit or bite in. His efforts were ferociously unwavering like he was desperate to kill and maim. Like it was the only thing he ever desired. Any semblance of humanity or strategy had all but disappeared. His movements had no predictability behind them. They were sudden and instinctive, lashing out at anything with deadly intent.

And with just a millisecond of hesitation, Ramona had failed to move quick enough, and a steel claw had ripped through the flesh on the back of her knees. She immediately crumbled with a scream as sensitive nerves and unprotected veins were shredded.

Koki and Chris both hooked onto the chimera’s flesh with their claws, attempting to anchor him in place, but with a clearly weakened target, Diego had zeroed in on her, snapping his jaws and clawing away at the dirt as Ramona attempted to crawl away. Her wounded knees uncooperating and left her pulling at the grass and mud just to barely escape the teeth.

As Carmen quickly limped to her sister's aid, barely able to support herself much less another person, she attempted to drag Ramona away from under her arms. Diego finally noticed the intrusions on his mangled fur holding him back. His momentum shifted like lightning, slamming his full weight with one of his elbows into Chris' chest, and turning his attention to the fox that just barely dodged his fangs.

Chris' already wounded ribs flared with agony as he rolled onto the ground. The jab had directly hit the deactivation button on his suit, retracting his protective claws with a flash of green and shattering the button. He wheezed as the air continued to escape his lungs, peeling himself off the ground despite the sharpness that was stabbing his chest.

His head shot up to Koki as he lost his footing, stumbling back into a kneeling position. The fox was dancing around Diego, taking small scratches and shoves, but it was clear she was slowing down, unable to keep up with the unnatural stamina Diego seemed to possess.

"Aviva!" Chris gasped into his earpiece, "We can't hold out much longer!"

"I'm working on it!" Aviva fumbled with a half-disassembled red creaturepod, switching around wires and metal plating. "The module was only half-installed. The shutdown is going to override the suit, but the stability nodes can't hold up under that stress. The surge protectors will fail and there's nothing to stop the overload from affecting the power source!"

Normally Chris could keep up with Aviva's rambles, but between the burning pain restricting his lungs and the intense heart rate from facing down with his abuser-turned-amalgamation from hell, he couldn't help but breathe out, "What?"

"It's going to blow up!" Koki translated, yelling from a few feet away. Despite the distraction being only a second, her small break in attention resulted in her miscalculating Diego's lunge. The chimera spun and a thick, scaled tail connected with Koki's gut forcing acid to travel up from her stomach into her throat. The appendage as heavy as lead, launched her backwards and had her rolling through the leaves of the underbrush until she finally skidded to a stop, tucked in a fetal position. As she coughed and gasped, attempting to clear her airways Diego charged with a howl. Claws tearing through dirt and bushes, bulldozing down small trees in his path as if they were just twigs.

Fear gripped her as Koki could feel his gallop through the ground, and his approaching panting as if he were a starving dog. She couldn't hold back the small yell of fear as she curled further in on herself, knowing she didn't have the energy to peel herself off the ground in time. But when the impact never came, and instead she heard the monster halt to a stop and back further away with unease steps, she peaked from under the arms shielding her face.

Chris had managed to jump onto the creature's back, holding his arms tight around Diego's neck even as he began to wildly thrash with gurgled growls. The creature slammed his back into a nearby tree, trying to dislodge Chris, but the brunette managed to keep his grip with only a grunt of pain.

With another round of vigorous thrashing and slamming into every nearby surface, Chris, no longer with the aid of a wolverine suit, lost his holding, and tumbled to the forest floor with a roll. He could still see Koki struggling to her knees in the corner of his eyes, and when he turned back to Diego the beast was wheezing, foam drooling from his mouth that mixed with the blood from the numerous claw marks through his patches of fur. Diego was heavily wounded, but he didn't seem to care. His unsettlingly humanoid eyes pierced through Chris, tracking his every movement.

Chris could feel the fear pumping through his blood, attempting to freeze his muscles. He saw as Diego's eyes traced down and locked in on his right arm the one Chris had been cradling to his chest for most of the night, and still had dried blood soaked through the bandages that he didn't have time to change. It was like Diego could smell he was wounded, the creature's nose twitching as he slowly inched forward with a low grumble. When Koki made another move to get up, Diego's pointed ears swiveled in her direction, and he almost began to turn towards her again.

Without thinking, Chris snatched a rock from the ground, and pitched it at the chimera, making a connection to his temple with a solid thud. Diego's head snapped back towards Chris with a growl echoing through the forest, crouching into a pouncing position.

The Kratt gave a sharp inhale as he straightened his back, gaining the full attention of the beast. As he locked eyes with the mindless creature, he couldn't stop his mind from traveling to a darker place.

Had this been what he looked like under the suit's control?

A mindless animal fixated on sinking his teeth into the nearest body...

Is this what Martin felt when his own brother looked at him as if he were prey?

Chris had been vaguely aware that his animalistic form in the reprogrammed suit had been monstrous. The screams of terror that plagued his dreams were enough to know that.

But to see it from an outside perspective; to be the cornered prey as a man in animal skins, with the strength of a predator but the hatred of a man targeted him, the fear and guilt combined. He saw himself in Diego's eyes. He felt deserving of the way the terror paralyzed him.

It was only right that he experienced the same torture as all the souls who met an end at his hands.

When Diego finally lunged letting out a scream mixed with a howl, Chris couldn't find a reason to move.

It seemed everyone's blood had been spilled for him, while Chris selfishly stood back and watched. His own hands had drawn more blood than he could ever hope to redeem.

He had tried so desperately to clean his hands. To correct the wrongs Diego had forced upon him. He'd done everything he could to make it right.

But all that resulted in was his brother and best friend's kidnapping and consequentially, their torture.

And now... the people he loved most were sprawled throughout the woods in various states of wellness, his own brother possibly running out of time.

It was like the harder he tried, the more he hurt the people around him.

He was tired.

The sounds of the forest seemed to muffle, his left ear annoyingly ringing as all other sounds were washed away.

But Koki's scream was crystal clear through the fog, piercing his skull as she cried in anguish and desperation. "CHRIS!!!"

The pain and distress in her voice snapped Chris back from his spiral and as Diego's form loomed over him, claws in the process of raining down, his instincts overcame him and Chris pushed away from the tree he was pinned against, rolling into a summersault behind Diego as the chimera sliced through the tree like paper.

A rush of adrenaline flowed through his veins and Chris launched to his feet once more.

Guilt flashed through his mind again, but he shoved it down. It didn't matter how exhausted he was. He couldn't afford to have a pity party now. He could hear Koki's anxious struggles as she wrestled herself off the ground and the constant shuffling of Aviva's anxious hands as she worked as fast as she could. He could imagine Jimmy's steady determined shoulders, despite the fear that laced his eyes.

And his brother, the one dying on the floor because of him. The one who lost sleep just to make sure he was safe in his bed every night. The one who was always around to listen, even when he didn't want to talk. The one who patiently awaited for his walls to break, just to come in and repair something that he desperately tried to hide away.

Even when Chris got angry, and demanded he didn't need the help. Even when Chris sabotaged himself and purposely avoided him. Even when Chris was in the skin of a monster trying to kill him...

He made a promise to himself; to protect the ones he loved no matter what. He couldn't protect them as a mangled corpse.

With renewed energy he picked up another stone, hitting Diego's face again who barely even flinched, "You may be drooling all over the floor, but you know, I really think this is an improvement."

Diego snarled though it was clear he hadn't comprehended a single word. His humanity so buried he wouldn't respond to his own name.

Knowing he had captured the chimera's attention, Chris made a break for it further into the woods, the 6-armed beast galloping after him like a bull in a china shop. He glanced down at his vest, the broken button mocking him with a small crackle of electricity.

Diego continued to shoulder over small trees and tear through logs as if they were sandcastles. He was gaining rapidly on Chris who was maneuvering the forest's obstacles with agility. At least out here, Diego would have no one else to get distracted with.

"Chris?!" He heard Koki's voice pierce the com with worry as they fled far from eyesight.

Chris didn't have time to give reassurance as Diego lunged, tackling Chris down a steep slope. They both slipped on the dead leaves, causing them to slide down the incline. Chris could feel claws grazing him as Diego tried to grab at him with his numerous arms. As soon as he felt himself on level ground once more, Chris' hands raced to explore the floor underneath him until his fingers grasped around a hefty fallen branch.

Diego leaped again with a roar and was met with a wooden rod. Chris swung the improvised weapon as he pulled it out of the leaves, the thick branch cracking in half as the impact threw Diego's head back. As the brunette huffed, scrambling to his feet, one of Diego's spare arms grasped his ankle, pulling him back to the floor where his chin met a rocky surface with a clack.

The claw dug into his ankle, pulling him towards the monster before being swung in the air, crunching through several low-hanging branches as Chris flew.

Coughing from where he landed, Chris spat the glob of blood that had gathered in his cheeks from biting his tongue, the red liquid staining his gums and leaving a smear at the corner of his mouth.

A laugh resembling a hyena's echoed as Diego approached. It was an ugly laugh, it sounded as if multiple different voices were attempting to talk out of the same throat, leaving it raspy and strained.

"At least..." Chris gasped to catch his breath as Diego slowly stalked closer. His shoulders were raised and his jaw unhinged, as if he knew his prey was too weak to run. He was toying with his food like a juvenile wild cat. "You finally got what you wanted."

Diego pounced, and his two top arms were met with Chris' as he pushed with all his strength, just barely wrestling the snapping jaws out of reach of his face.

"Chris! The remote is ready!" Aviva's urgent voice filled his ear with a small amount of static. His earpiece must have gotten damaged at some point. "You need to get as far away as you can!"

"Do it!" Chris gritted out without hesitation. He let out a shout of pain as Diego pushed harder onto his right arm. He could feel the hot breath against his skin as the mangled fangs lunged rapidly for his neck. "Deactivate him!"

Hearing his shout Aviva paused. "Are you clear?! Did you not hear what I said about the overload?"

"Chris, where are you?!" Koki's weakened voice joined immediately after.

Chris felt his right arm buckle under the pressure, and he had to shift, putting his full weight into his left which clawed against Diego's neck trying to keep his jaws away. At his lack of immediate answer and the continued sounds of a struggle, the team began calling for a response.

"Just..." Chris gasped as the flailing claws tore at his chest and legs, the chimera impatient with his struggle. "DO IT!"

Being nearly pressed against the suit which had melted into Diego's flesh, Chris didn't have to guess what the result would be. He didn't have the strength to free himself. He knew it was a downhill battle that he couldn't win. If the crew delayed any further, it was more than likely because they would attempt a rescue, which would only result in their own safety being risked as well.

And despite the fear pounding his heart, and the tears beginning to pool in the corner of his eyes as Diego overpowered him, he stared back into Diego's eyes with undivided determination.

Perhaps this was a fate he wasn't supposed to escape; a fitting punishment for the evil he had unknowingly had a hand in. Maybe *this* was the edge of the cliff. He had finally slipped too far, dangling off the edge with only his fingertips, and had no way of pulling himself back up. And Diego was like a pressure pulling and clawing at his legs, wrestling him further away from the edge.

He felt the temptation of letting go.

To finally let the empty air consume him. Only this time with the reassurance that Diego would fall with him.

He was so tired.

He felt his eyes close, escaping the mangled man who crowded his vision, and his arm twitched, like a powerlifter who had finally exceeded his limit. A series of voices in his comm rang out, all jumbled together into an incomprehensible string of words.

"Chris?"

The voice was soft, just barely picked up as if it were close enough to one of the other mics to hear but not very clearly.

But to Chris, it was like a transmission directly in his ear. The voice was strained but unmistakable. He had heard that voice since he was only a child; had listened to it grow as the owner did.

"Wh're's Chris? 'S he 'kay?"

"Martin?" He breathed out, holding strong against Diego for just a second longer when he heard a thick moist snapping sound. His head shot up to the top of the incline, where Koki and Ramona had pushed a dead log from its resting place, sending it bouncing down the hill right for him.

Chris let out a gasp as the large trunk slammed into Diego who let out a high-pitched cry and pinned him against a thick healthier tree.

Chris was too shocked to do anything besides stare from where he continued to lay on the ground, despite being relieved of the weight that pinned him.

"C'mon CK!" A hand appeared, snatching his and yanking him forcefully to his feet. "What happened to zero confrontation, huh?"

The brunette let his body be pulled and followed blindly along with the motions. Jimmy was pulling him through the maze of bushes taking a less steep route back towards Koki.

Chris could picture himself back on that cliff, his last finger slipping just off the edge when four more had snatched out, gripping onto his arm with a painful force.

"Now, Aviva!" Koki yelled into the earpiece, "We're clear!"

Chris didn't turn his head as they ran but he could hear the splintering wood from Diego clawing himself free. It was impossible to miss the red light that suddenly flooded from behind them, casting long shadows of their silhouettes.

Diego howled, again, this time a humanoid shout seemed to overpower the rest. It was the closest thing to a syllable that had escaped his mouth since the suit had overtaken him. It rang through the forest in agony, piercing through Chris' skull like a last-ditch effort to harm him. A crackle of electricity followed, buzzing through the air to the point it could be tasted through the groups inhaled as they continued to run.

Another scream, and then the forest was engulfed in light as if the sun itself had fallen out of the sky. A wave of aftershock threw their feet from underneath them, sending them tumbling through the mud.

And then it was quiet.

Notes:

I genuinely don't have much to say LOL I think the chapter speaks for itself.

Thank you guys so so so much for reading! Don't worry there's still one more chapter left ;) I'll see you all next week <3

Chapter 14 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/57169900/chapters/151699861>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_14_endnotes\)](#).)

The warmth of the sun filtering onto his eyelids is what eventually stirred Martin from a slumber he hadn't even realized he was under.

Blinking slowly, a dim ceiling met him, tiled, and clearly not the metal paneling from the Tortuga. The room was flooded with a soft natural light and was eerily silent. The rustling of the sheets as he pulled his arms free of the blankets sounded louder than they probably should have. A small tug on one of his arms had Martin sleepily traveling his gaze from the clear tubes that were taped to his wrists up to a bag that was suspended near his head. He stared dumbfounded for a moment, the gears in his head barely turning as if they were trying to unthaw.

He slowly but finally came to the conclusion he was in a hospital.

'Man, Chris hates hospitals', was his first thought, which triggered the realization that he was *in a hospital*.

His recollection came flooding back; the last memory being looking up at Aviva's scared face. He was calling out for Chris, she was scared *for* Chris.

"CHRIS?!" Martin shot up into a sitting position, regret following instantly as a dulled pain tore through his side like a cramp. He clutched the side of his skin with a grunt, while more carefully shifting to the edge of the bed, still determined to escape it.

He managed to rip the various tubes and wires that were attached to him, wobbling into a standing position by gripping the IV stand. His legs felt numb like they were still asleep and delayed in their response when he attempted to walk towards the door. He clawed past one of the uncomfortable chairs, making a lunge for the doorknob as his next anchor.

He overestimated the distance and was about to get a face full of tile if someone hadn't opened the door, and instinctively caught him from under the arms. Martin grabbed onto their shoulders, stopping his descent but not quite having the balance to correct himself, so instead they remained in the awkward position of bent knees.

Martin's head whipped up with a sharp gasp. He immediately recognized the familiar mop of brown hair, with streaks of bleached white. Chris was staring right back, eyes filled with worry, but his brows were clenched with strain.

"Guys... help..." He muttered, and Martin realized Chris had been supporting his entire weight with only his left arm.

A few pairs of hands came to their aid, pulling Martin back upright and relieving Chris who let out a breath of alleviation.

Martin's eyes darted to the side, meeting with the friendly smiles of Koki and Jimmy. They both had bandages littering their skin, and Koki's arm was encased in gauze.

His head snapped back forward when a shorter form wrapped her arms around his neck in a tight embrace. "Martin!" Aviva squealed. Her hair was back in its trademark ponytail and the uncooperative strands tickled his face.

He slowly wrapped his arms around her back, trying to process what he was experiencing. It was like he had just woken up from a terrible dream and didn't know how to disconcert what was real and what was fake.

One thing he could take joy in was the fact that Aviva was *safe*. No dungeon to be seen. Koki and Jimmy quickly joined the embrace, cradling Aviva and Martin between them.

"Martin..." the soft voice stole his attention as Martin looked over Aviva's shoulder at the wide eyes of his brother. Those eyes held so much fear, but also joy, and exhaustion.

Chris looked terrible, bandaged up like a mummy and with his right arm in a splint. He stayed just out of reach, but Martin could see the small smile pulling at his face.

"Sorry for leaving you alone, you weren't supposed to be up for another few hours," Koki explained.

"Yeah, and I was hungry..." Jimmy nervously laughed.

"What happened?" Martin dared to ask as they gently departed.

"We have a lot to catch you up on..." Aviva supplied as she coaxed the blonde back towards the bed. Martin didn't fight as his knees were already shaking.

They sat around the bed, Aviva, cross-legged at the foot of it, while Koki sat just off the edge. Jimmy had turned one of the chairs backward to lean over the back, and Chris remained just on the edge of their small circle, leaning back in a chair with his arms resting in his lap.

They all took turns sharing their account of the night's events, Chris stayed silent until Koki recalled how he had lured Diego deeper into the woods alone before briefly explaining Diego's demise. He ignored the pointed look Aviva was giving him as he glossed over some of the minute details.

"So... he's gone?" Martin questioned after their long-winded explanations. "Like someone actually checked for a corpse this time, right?"

"Trust me, there wasn't much to find," Koki emphasized.

Martin relaxed back into his pillows with a breath of astonishment... It was over.

Yet something about the tense silence that followed told him it wasn't.

The group sat around chatting casually for most of the day, no one brave enough to leave the comforting atmosphere of company. But all of their words seemed forced like their minds still hadn't left what had happened in the woods, but discussing it would be like repeating the same conversation again.

It wasn't until the sun had crossed the sky, leaving a warm glow flowing from the singular window that Jimmy finally caved and offered to go grab everyone some food. Not wanting to venture alone, Aviva and Koki agreed to accompany him, promising to return as soon as possible.

Chris had started to rise from his chair with intent to join before being forced back down with a reminder that he was technically supposed to be on bed rest as well as Martin.

The mummified brunette settled back into his chair with a grumble as the more conversational people of the group left them in silence.

Martin couldn't help but see the familiarity in their situation.

"I really hate hospitals," Chris finally broke the silence, which enlisted a small laugh out of his brother.

Martin was growing impatient with his brother's distance. He could tell that something was wrong just by looking at Chris, but was cutting him some slack considering the circumstances. He didn't expect anyone to really be *okay*.

Martin scooted over, pulling open the blanket as an invitation, mimicking the one Chris had given to him all those months ago, "That chair looks pretty uncomfortable."

Chris let out a sigh but moved to accept regardless. Carefully adjusting himself to avoid any pressure on Martin's side which was being held together with stitches. As he got situated, Martin wrapped his arms protectively around him in an embrace. "You know, maybe hospitals aren't so bad; you actually let me hug you."

"Don't push it," Chris grumbled but made no attempt to move from where he relaxed fully into his brother's arms. He couldn't stop his exhausted eyes from falling closed as he listened to the steady beating of his heart. Martin's skin had regained its normal warm temperature.

"I'm sorry..." Martin finally whispered, "I should've been more help... I-"

"Don't," Chris cut him off. "You almost died, Martin." He snapped.

Martin wanted to remind him that they all did, but chose to hold his tongue.

"The infection was bad. The doctors said if we hadn't gotten you here when we did..." Chris trailed off.

Martin hummed in guilty acknowledgment. He scared Chris. Bad. He could hear the shakiness in his tone.

"You helped me when I needed it most," Chris mumbled, almost too soft to even hear.

Martin cocked an eyebrow, not quite sure if Chris even wanted him to acknowledge it. Instead he tightened his arms around his brother, letting out a long sigh as they got comfortable once more. He could feel Chris' shoulders begin to untense, becoming a limp weight at his side.

But still, there was one uncertainty lingering in the air. Martin couldn't stand to ignore it any longer.

"Are we... good?"

Chris gave a small nod before his voice followed, "We will be."

Chris had taken it upon himself to enforce Martin's bedrest; rarely leaving his side and not shying away from scolding him at any opportunity. Of course, the crew found plenty of amusement with his drill sergeant persona.

Martin, however, was one more nitpick away from throwing himself down the stairs.

He was beyond relieved and grateful for his brother's safety, but feeling a little too cooped up to be able to appreciate it to the fullest.

Which is how he managed to arrange for the rest of the crew to distract Chris for a few hours so Martin could stretch his legs without a fight breaking out between the two.

He had gone so far as to feign sleep when Aviva had dragged Chris out of the room with reassurances that Martin wouldn't need any monitoring.

He started to feel a little bad about it, knowing Chris' separation anxiety had been especially prominent, but couldn't bring himself to regret it by the time he situated himself on a wooden bench right outside overlooking a small courtyard. He was partly shaded by a large oak tree but the small glimpses of sun peaking through felt incredible on his skin.

He was too busy enjoying the fresh air to notice another figure until she had sat down at the other end of the bench, leaving a healthy space between them.

She was wearing a long designer coat with heeled boots. Her long black hair was tied in a low ponytail and a pair of chunky sunglasses covered half her face.

Martin scrunched his nose in confusion until it finally hit him.

"I was told you disappeared right after it happened..." Martin muttered.

"Medical records are a liability," The tall woman explained.

Martin hummed and looked back towards the courtyard where a pair of cardinals were foraging.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Martin decided to be the one to break it. "Is Carmen...?"

"She'll live," Ramona shortly answered. "She's had worse."

Martin couldn't help the small relieved sigh. He had heard what condition she had been left in. It had been plaguing the back of his mind since he'd woken up. It also pained him in a way. That someone so young had been led into a life such as this. He couldn't find it within himself to be vengeful towards Ramona for it, but his head still swam with so many questions that he knew he had no place to ask.

He had tried to put himself in Ramona's shoes, but still couldn't ever imagine a scenario where he would put Chris into a situation like that. He supposed as much as he tried, he would never understand their situation entirely. In some ways, he resented her. In others, he understood her better than most.

But, having almost lost his own family quite recently, he could empathize with one thing, "I'm sorry... about your brother." Because despite everything, that's what he was; her brother. And while he had no sympathy for the man's undoing, he knew familial love went deeper than actions. She may have experienced pain by his hand, but she grieved him no less.

Ramona shook her head, "Don't be. He did it to himself." This time she was the one to awkwardly turn towards him, speaking in a way that was clearly unfamiliar to her. "I... I came here to apologize."

For a moment it looked like she was about to continue, but nothing came out. She looked away again, fists tightening where they rested on her knees.

"Thank you," Martin nodded towards her. "Though I have to admit, I hope our paths don't cross again," He said in a lighthearted tone. However, his words had truth behind them. He didn't need Koki to run a background check to know Ramona had been involved in criminal activity. She had probably racked up a hefty sentence if turned in, but Martin was also a firm believer in second chances.

Ramona gave a short laugh. "Trust me, my brother and I never shared his ambition. As far as you're concerned, my occupation died with him." She got up from the bench, dusting off her leather pants as she did so.

"Shame," Martin sighed sarcastically. "I still owe you a dance."

"And I owe you a drink," Ramona smirked.

Their banter was hollow though as they both knew neither would ever fulfill those debts.

Martin pulled himself up, wincing only slightly as he did so. "Take care of your sister," Martin bid as his farewell. It was the only advice he had to offer on her promise of a new life.

Ramona only waved, continuing to walk briskly down a stone path, and soon enough she had turned the corner and was gone.

With Martin's infection on the mend, and flesh wounds having been given proper care and dressing, the discharge had been only a few days later. Packing up from the room they had practically camped out in, The Tortuga sat in the parking lot with its engines warmed.

Things had been a little tense between the crew in the last few days. Nobody seemed too eager to be left alone at any given time, and conversations seemed to dance around any future plans. No one was brave enough to try and question what came next. At least in the hospital room, they could use their environment like a checkpoint; a place of rest. But as they loaded themselves back onto the research vessel with a few new scars, they knew it wasn't going to be the same.

And that was terrifying.

Besides just getting up in the air and away from their current location, there was no destination in mind.

Which wasn't unusual for the Tortuga. They frequently let the adventure find them, cruising along rich habitats for their next study. Excitedly on the hunt for whatever creature called to them.

But this time it was different. It felt more... leisurely.

It was reminiscent of piling in a vehicle and cruising along an empty interstate in the middle of the night with nothing but a radio to keep you company.

The adventurers never bode too well with sitting still; wasting their day. But when Jimmy landed the Tortuga on an isolated shoreline, no one complained.

By the time the sun was setting and the waves were lazily lapping at the sand under their feet, a small campfire had been built, illuminating the air with a safe warmth.

There still hadn't been much discussion of substance between them. Playful comments about the small pile of sand Jimmy had unconsciously begun building turned into a full-blown sculpture with the rest of the crew acting as the harsh judges.

It didn't take long for roaring laughter to fall upon them as the aforementioned sculpture was whisked away by the rising tide and Jimmy's short-lived career was ruined.

And for a few hours, they could forget. They could laugh and tease and point out how beautiful the world around them was; just like they always had.

That moment couldn't last forever.

Chris had gotten quiet after a while. Pulling back from the conversation that continued without him with a far-off look in his eyes. His right hand was playing with the sand underneath it, grabbing a handful before letting it gently fall again. His fist didn't close quite as far as it should have.

At some point they fell into silence once again, listening to the wood crackle as the sun lowered further into the horizon.

"I've been thinking..." Aviva blurted out, gaining everyone's attention.

They'd all been doing a lot of thinking. It was the lack of talking that was starting to become suffocating.

"What if..." She stopped herself, an anxious and unsure expression coating her face. At the group's patient silence, she folded her knees up to her chin before continuing. "What if I decommissioned the creature power suits?"

A few eyebrows shot up in surprise, yet no one rushed to answer.

"What do you mean?" Koki innocently asked, Aviva had never retired an invention before. Even the more meager ones. She had never believed in giving up on something she'd made. She'd rebuilt it a thousand times or repurposed it into something else.

"I just mean like..." Aviva bit her tongue, stuttering over her words to find an explanation. "I didn't realize... how *dangerous* they could be." In a smaller voice, she questioned, "What if it happens again? Diego may have needed my help, but he was *close*. Too close. What if something I made to protect and understand... turns into a *weapon*?"

"You can't blame yourself for what Diego twisted them into," Jimmy tried to encourage with a concerned expression but Aviva quickly shot him down.

"It doesn't matter whose fault it is!" She looked desperately out into the ocean. "If my invention has the potential to be corrupted to such an extreme, don't I have a responsibility to keep it from happening by any means necessary?" Her voice cracked at the end of her sentence. Emotion dripped from her shoulders as she wrapped her arms around herself.

She did not offer to destroy her life's work lightly. Those vests were each meaningful and sentimental to her. To give up... To willingly sacrifice her greatest treasure, was possibly the hardest decision she ever had to make. She would be losing a part of herself.

But it hadn't left her mind since the hospital; since seeing her friends coated in bandages, with haunted looks in their eyes. She couldn't close her eyes without seeing that... *amalgamation* Diego had become.

It was quiet again. Aviva dared a glance up at her friend's faces who were all staring in various directions with intense looks of contemplation. Martin especially had a small frown and a watery look in his eyes.

None of them seemed to disagree with her, or at least willing to argue. Aviva's eyes traveled back towards the ground. She had almost wished they would. That they would give her a reason to rethink. Unfortunately, after all the devastation they had faced... she wasn't sure if anyone was capable of providing one good enough.

"I think..." Chris finally broke his long silence with a small voice. "Being able to have that connection with the world around us is a gift. One of the best ones I've ever been given. Even if I've seen the worse side of it... I've also seen the best." His gaze traveled over to his friends who stared at him absorbing his words. "The amount of life we're capable of discovering and protecting... The level of understanding we can have of the creatures around us... it's something I never wanted to take for granted." Chris looked toward Aviva, a small smile of encouragement on his face. "It's a big responsibility to be the creator of a tool like that, but I don't know anyone more qualified to do it."

"But..." Chris added, "It's your invention, Aviva. Whatever you choose, we'll follow your lead, always."

The crew gave agreeing nods, as their shoulders softened and the tenseness left their bodies. Aviva let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding as she relaxed slightly looking back out into the gentle ocean. A small smile crept onto her face as their friendly banter soon continued, even Chris joining in this time.

No, things wouldn't be the same.

They all knew that the minute they wordlessly piled pillows and blankets into the main room instead of retiring to their own beds for the night, putting on a movie instead of setting alarm clocks.

Martin dozed off several times, jolting awake every time and only relaxing when Chris would gently tap him to remind Martin of his presence. Lettuce was laid shamelessly in Chris' arms, emanating a warmth that could be felt on Koki's back who was nearly pressed up against him.

Some of them, being able to fully relax for the first time in days, melted into the sheets and tangle of limbs. Chris, running his hands through his brother's hair in a rare display of affection, was watching over them with tired eyes that were guaranteed to stay open throughout the night.

"So, what adventure 're we goin' on tomorrow?" Martin mumbled sleepily, causing a few soft giggles between his friends.

"I'm thinking..." Chris hummed, "Alaska..."

A series of agreements rang out in various states of awareness as sleep claimed them one by one.

But regardless... they were going to be alright.

Notes:

"So, what adventure 're we goin' on tomorrow?"

"I'm thinking...group therapy"

And alas... the last chapter of Decoded...

Regarding the decommission of the creature power suits, I left the answer kinda vague on purpose. They continue their creature adventures, but if you think they would be happier without the suits, then that's up to your interpretation :]

There are still a couple of things I left unaddressed (like urm Chris' very weak will to live LOL) but I'm thinking of covering a few of those things in some one-shots in the future. But I think this is the most appropriate place to end this story. They're gonna be alright <3

I just want to give a huge huge thank you to everyone who's read this far, and been supporting me with kudos, comments, playlists, fanart, and just general interest in this story. It means the world to me that you all enjoy my silly writing so much. This is the first time I've ever written a long-term story like this, and it's been such a thrilling experience. It's been almost a year since we embarked on this journey and I'm really sad that it's come to an end. While I'll miss posting about this every Saturday... I'm excited to start on some new stories and I hope you follow me along for the ride.

Thank you all, and I'll see you on the creature trail <3

Series this work belongs to:

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Close (#).